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## Sony and Oculus Rift on the new VR revolution

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**BACK ON TRACK?**  
Nintendo rejoin the race with Mario Kart 8

**END OF DAYZ**  
How Rust will rule the apocalypse



**REPEAT OFFENDERS**  
Does replayability really matter?

### HIGHLIGHTS

WATCH DOGS ■ ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE ■ DYING LIGHT ■ ALIEN: ISOLATION  
LEGO THE HOBBIT ■ ASSASSIN'S CREED: UNITY ■ GOD OF WAR ■ HEARTHSTONE  
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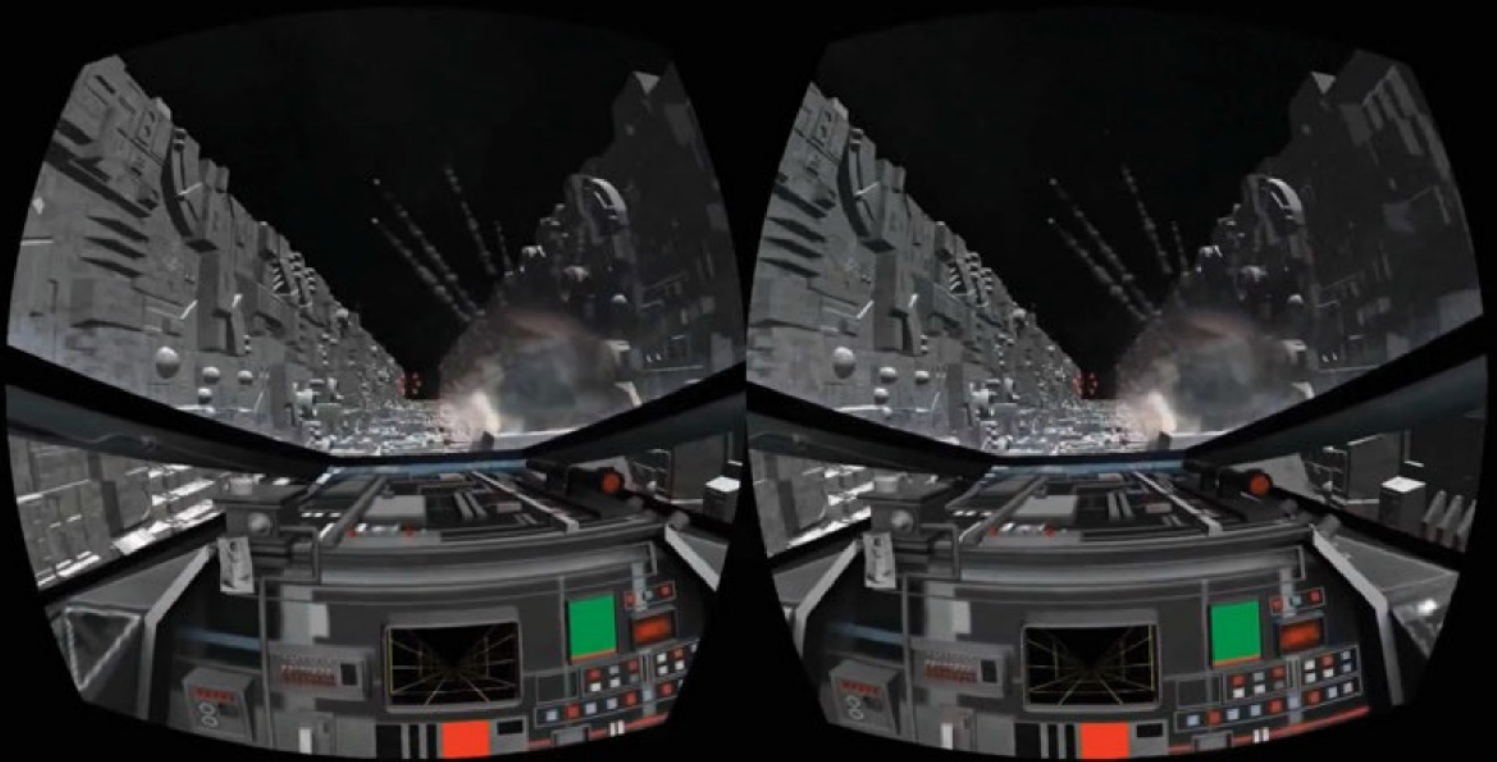


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Some of us are old enough to remember the first time virtual reality was being described as revolutionary. We waited in line to sample the otherworldly presence of *Dactyl Nightmare*, paying £4 (£7 today) for the privilege of experiencing a nauseating but compelling three-minutes of nascent deathmatching. It was undeniably thrilling to glimpse the future, but the Virtuality machines and their successors didn't offer much of a present. The technology was expensive and bulky (or otherwise cheap and nasty) and the graphics and gameplay basic. With first-person shooters like *Doom* projecting all the immersion we could handle and the information superhighway offering a more expansive – albeit abstract – reality, VR quickly became yesterday's vision.

Two decades on much has changed, certainly in terms of technology. Interestingly though the same gold rush mentality seems to have reappeared. Instead of Nintendo, Sega and Atari, it's Sony, Facebook and Microsoft ploughing fortunes into research, design and acquisition. Whether or not VR succeeds this time around will depend on a number of convergent factors rather than hindsight, but the question that intrigues us most is whether in light of recent events it ultimately matters whether gamers line up to sample the reality like they did once before. VR, it appears, has become destiny.

*Richard Shoemaker*

**Richard Shoemaker**  
EDITOR

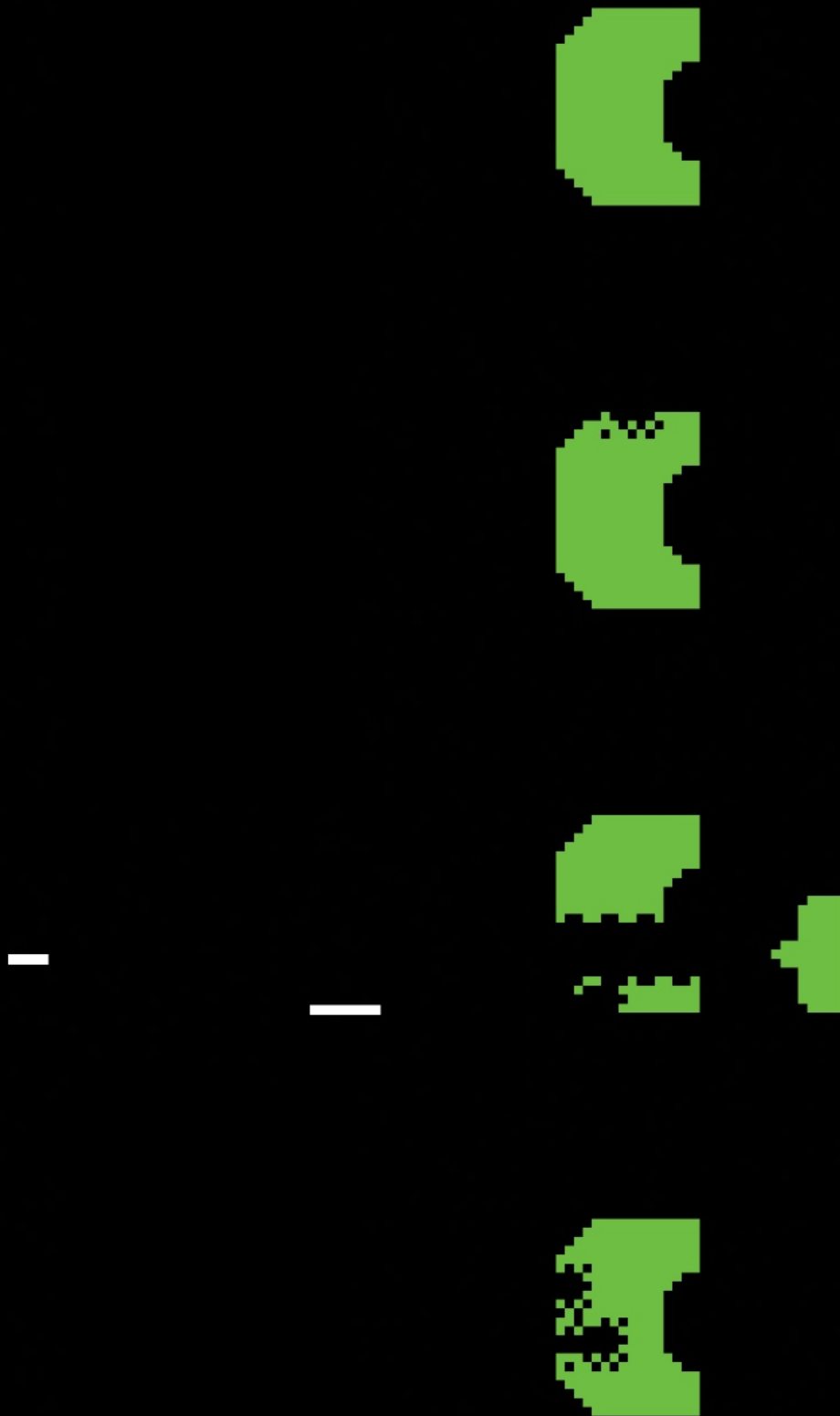
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## DISCUSS

### 08 Replay Value

After some gamers complained of feeling short-changed by *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes*, we consider how important replay value is to a game, and what can be done to accommodate it

### 12 The Illusion Of Choice

We consider the illusion of morality that games with multiple choices give the player, and why more developers need to take advantage of this conceit that's unique to gaming

### 14 Ubisoft Montreal Infiltrated

We talk to Ubisoft Montreal's creative director and lead game designer about *Watch Dogs*

### 18 Column: Coast to Coast

Gray Nicholson considers when – if ever – the best time to get rid of your last-gen consoles might be



### 98 The Elder Scrolls Online

## FEATURES

### 69 Next-Gen Round 2

It's been six months since the release of the next-gen consoles, so we take a step back and examine Sony and Microsoft's consoles

### 74 Mario Kart 8: Back on Track

It may be too late to get on the podium but with its latest arcade racer on the grid, Nintendo might just be able to make up some time

### 80 Campo Santo: From the Walking Dead to Forest Fires

We head into the wilderness with veterans of TellTale and Klei Entertainment, as a new studio pitches its debut game

### 86 End of DayZ

With zombies cast out, the creator of *Garry's Mod* is hoping to start a brave new society for end-of-the-world sandbox gamers

### 91 Surviving the Apocalypse

games™ compiles the ultimate survival guide to the myriad apocalypses you'll find in gaming



### 36 The Crew

## PREVIEWS

- 36 The Crew
- 40 Dying Light
- 42 Assassin's Creed Unity
- 44 Bound By Flame
- 46 Oddworld: New 'N' Tasty
- 48 Blood Bowl 2
- 50 Carmageddon
- 52 Space Engineers
- 54 Wildstar
- 56 Alien: Isolation

## REVIEWS

- 100 The Elder Scrolls Online
- 104 Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster
- 106 Lego The Hobbit
- 108 Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft
- 110 Kinect Sports Rivals
- 112 Age of Wonders III
- 114 Goat Simulator
- 115 BioShock Infinite – Burial at Sea, Episode 2
- 116 Diablo III: Reaper of Souls
- 118 Tales of Symphonia
- 120 Betrayal
- 121 Spate
- 123 The Witch And The Hundred Knight
- 124 Out There
- 124 Luftrausers
- 124 10 Second Ninja

## RETRO

### 130 Behind The Scenes: God of War

Director David Jaffe reveals to games™ how Kratos was an angry blessing for the PlayStation 2

### 138 Best Boss: Contra 3

Because killing cyborgs in space never gets old

### 140 Game Changers: Tomb Raider

We examine how a small studio in Derby and its iconic protagonist changed the face of platform-adventuring forever

### 144 Retro Interview: the Pickford brothers

Ste and John Pickford wax lyrical about their extensively impressive back catalogue – ranging from 1983 to 2011

### 150 Retro Guide to Llamasoft

As *TxK* storms the Vita, we look back at the myriad epileptic titles Llamasoft has in its colourful roster

## FAVOURITES

### 16 Column: NowGamer

NowGamer.com editor Ryan King was sure the next-gen was around here somewhere...

### 19 5 Things About... Wolfenstein: The New Order

We examine the five most interesting things about the newest instalment in the long-running *Wolfenstein* franchise

### 20 Reader Reaction: The Gaming BAFTAs

We asked you if you thought the gaming industry is the right place for all the ceremony and glamour of the awards shows traditionally defined by films.

### 156 Essentials: Stereotypical Brits

Because us Brits are more than just smarmy villains, promise. Well, we'd like to think so

### 158 The Vault

games™ sifts through the myriad accessories and add-ons the industry offers so you don't have to







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**24** Feature

# Ocular Shift

After Sony's announcement of its new VR machine, Project Morpheus, **games™** dives headfirst into the world of VR to examine the new videogame console war – one that will take place right before our eyes



“Fortunately, we have enough options that virtually no two players will ever have exactly the same experience”

Drew Karpysyn, lead writer, Mass Effect

(REPEAT OFFENDERS)

## Replayability: Does It Matter?

→ Story-driven games are getting shorter, offering supposed ‘replay value’ in the form of achievements and unlocks instead, but surely there are better incentives for players?

**R**eplayability is a hot topic right now in the gaming industry. Games are becoming shorter, yet some of the shortest and most celebrated remain incomplete by most that buy them. Added value in the form of harder modes, item unlocks and side quests are often flaunted as features to pull players through and hopefully send them around again. Is there pressure on developers to create this sort of replayability in games today? Perhaps more importantly, is it necessary and are there better ways?

“We design a game to be played through once.” Thomas Grip is the creative director of Frictional Games, working on games like *Amnesia*, *Penumbra* and the upcoming *Soma*. “There is some pressure on having a certain play time, but we’ve never felt the need to make games replayable.” Grip is one

of the people at the forefront of the pursuit of better storytelling in games. He gave a talk about working toward a better merge of narrative and gameplay at this year’s Game Developers Conference.

Of course, replayability is necessary for a lot of games. But is it needed in narrative driven games like the ones that Grip and others are striving towards? “Some games



Above Frictional’s Thomas Grip doesn’t want you to keep coming back.

obviously thrive on replay, like *Tetris*,” he says. “When you add story it becomes a bit more complicated, and I think it partly depends on how willing the player is to hear it again. For example, some people might have a favourite book they read every year.” So the challenge lies in creating a story that people will want to hear again, rather than artificially creating reasons why the player should play the game through a second time. Equally, the gameplay itself has to be good enough to lure people back in. We’ve all got a favourite movie we’ve watched at least twice, and probably many more times. We keep going back to it because of the great story, or the brilliant acting. Not because we’re promised a new experience the next time round. Most games that everyone’s played a bunch of times, like *Tetris*, have replayability built into the mechanics, and that’s the best way to do it. There’s no story, and no new incentives to keep playing.



## Your guide to the essential stories

**12 ILLUSION OF CHOICE**  
Games have been pushing players down the paths of good and evil for years. Wouldn't it be fun to wander off the beaten track?

**14 WATCH DOGS**  
Ubisoft talks to **games™** about its imminent urban sandbox and what it will be saying about the lives of others.

**16 WOLFENSTEIN**  
In just a few more weeks the longest running FPS series will be back in our sights. Check out why we're looking forward to it.

**20 AWARD MATTERS**  
The BAFTAs are probably the most prestigious game awards in the world, but do they influence the games you buy?

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“You almost never show a trick twice... People spot patterns, or are harder to distract a second time”

Thomas Grip, creative director, Frictional Games

“The ‘story’ of Counter-Strike map Dust2 is always the same, but no match plays out exactly the same way”

Ed Stern, lead writer, Splash Damage

It's the gameplay that keeps us coming back. Where it gets interesting is where replay means some things no longer work.

“When performing magic,” Grip continues, “you almost never show a trick twice. This is because people spot patterns, or are harder to distract a second time, meaning they might uncover the secret of the trick, ruining it. There are tons of tricks we can use in games that are worthless a second time. For instance in *Amnesia* we rely a lot on the player not knowing when there is actual danger, and on them not understanding what happens if they are killed. These things are not replayable, and we could not have them if replay were a feature we needed. Some games would be impossible to make if replay were a necessity.”

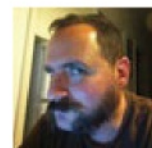
**FOR MANY GAMES**, replay is most certainly a necessity in the form of multiplayer. Ed Stern is a game writer at Splash Damage

and has worked on games such as *Enemy Territory*, *Brink*, and the multiplayer section of *Batman: Arkham Origins*. “I work in the triple-A genre, generally involving multiplayer shooters, trying to write my way out of technical corners... If done right, multiplayer can be a sandbox, toolbox and ruleset to let players forge their own narratives. The ‘story’ of *Counter-Strike* map Dust2 is always the same, but no match on it plays out exactly the same way. Except when I keep getting sniped through the gates.”

So from Stern's perspective, if he feels like he's written something good, does he want the player to experience it multiple times? “It depends on the project. I think there's an art to writing stuff that tells the player: ‘Look, this isn't the important bit, move along over there, that's what you need to be looking at.’ Just purely in terms of dialogue, very very few lines are still fun or cool the eleventybillionth

time of hearing. If I write a line I like, and then the voice actor's delivery makes it even better, and then I see someone's used it in their forum signature, well, that's a good day.”

Obviously different studios have different priorities. Unlike Frictional, Splash Damage designs games that are supposed to be replayed. Stern believes that “publishers are usually pretty keen for their single-player games to have multiplayer too, so that people keep playing it, which keeps their friends buying it. Sometimes the multiplayer bits are an afterthought, and feel that way.”



Above: Splash Damage's Ed Stern knows the power of multiplayer gaming when it comes to repeat play.

“I spend five years [working on a game] and 12 hours later the player is done with it. That's heartbreaking”

Ken Levine, co-founder, Irrational Games

→ UNCHARTED WRITER AMY HENNING JOINS VISCERAL AS CREATIVE DIRECTOR ON STAR WARS PROJECT →

## GROUNDHOG PLAY

→ If at first you do succeed, try again anyway



## METAL GEAR SOLID V: GROUND ZEROES

■ MARCH SAW THE release of *Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes*. The core story mission can be completed in just a couple of hours. In fact, by skipping all the cutscenes and side missions, it has already been finished in around ten minutes. Needless to say, the game has received a lot of criticism for its shortness. The developers have stated that *Ground Zeroes* was always meant to be a shorter precursor to the upcoming *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. Additionally the game is said to be highly replayable. You can get unlocks for a second playthrough, as well as being able to find side-quests and secrets you may have missed the first time. Is this an acceptable excuse for its length? Certainly not to those expecting a standard length *MGS* game.



## TITANFALL

■ TITANFALL TAKES A rather interesting approach to storytelling. Normally the campaign and multiplayer modes are separate, but here they are combined. There is no single-player mode in *Titanfall* other than the tutorial. Instead, the story plays out during pre-game lobbies, in short cutscenes before matches start, and even during games with radio messages and video popups in the corner of the screen. Is the omission of a full story mode something that has players up in arms? Not really, and it's not surprising, with the frequent lack of enthusiasm for single-player campaigns.



## INFAMOUS: SECOND SON

■ DEPENDING ON YOUR ACTIONS in *Infamous: Second Son*, your karma will change. Being evil has its benefits, as does being good, but you can't be both at the same time or, to be honest, much in between. The final mission will change depending on your karma, resulting in a different ending for both sides of the spectrum. If you want to see them both, you'll have to play through the game again making different moral decisions. Would you want to put all that extra time in, or would you prefer to just watch the other ending on YouTube and go play something else?

→ Sometimes they're very carefully considered extensions of the main game. Sometimes the single-player is just a fancy tutorial for the multiplayer, which is the real meat of the thing. Multiplayer can certainly be an effective way to keep people playing a game, more so than trying to make the single-player meaningfully replayable again and again."

However, that is precisely what Ken Levine, former creative director at Irrational Games, is trying to do. In his talk "Narrative Legos" at GDC, he outlined his basic idea for 'endlessly replayable narrative'. He wants to move away from the intricately detailed plots of his past games like *BioShock*, and move onto something more open ended. He spoke about creating characters that react with the player and each other to create stories that haven't actually been written, they are simply acting on their desires. What's more is that he wants characters to have randomisable traits that change on each playthrough. It all sounds incredibly ambitious from a technical perspective, and from a storytelling perspective, it sounds even stranger. Do you want your favourite character to be totally different from how you remember them the second time through? It opens the door for a lot of variety, but can computer generated storylines ever be as emotionally driven as one written by a human?

Drew Karpyshyn is a giant in the game writing world. *Baldur's Gate II*, *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic* and *Mass Effect* are just some of the stories he's helped create. "Narrative replayability is something we worked very hard to include. I think one of the great things in BioWare-style games like *Mass Effect*



**Brief:** Games like *Call of Duty* and *Titanfall* are centred around multiplayer with the concept of resetting your progress entirely.



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**Briest** Not so much *Ground Zeroes* as *Fleeting Pain*, eh readers?

“There are several major decisions that impact the story... Customisation is a key element to both story design and gameplay at BioWare”

**Drew Karpyshtyn, lead writer, Mass Effect series**

is that players can play through multiple times and get very different experiences. Choosing Renegade or Paragon options in *Mass Effect* gives a very different feel to the action, and there are several major decisions that impact the story in significant ways, such as who lives or dies. Customisation is a key element to both story design and gameplay at BioWare. Fortunately, we have enough options that virtually no two players will ever

have exactly the same experience even if they play through the game multiple times.” Variety is the spice of life, so do people want to play a game a second and third time to see what would change? To do that, they have to finish it first.

**APPARENTLY, FINISHING** games is rarer than you might think. Tom Abernathy, Narrative Lead at Riot Games, and Richard Rouse III, Design Lead at Microsoft Game Studios, gave a joint talk about game narrative at GDC entitled “Death to the Three-Act Structure”. They talked about game completion using statistics based on Steam achievements, and most importantly the ones that signify the end of the story. Only 32% of players completed the story in *Skyrim*. That may not be all that surprising, it’s a large game, with a lot of side narrative. However, *Portal* only has a 47% completion rate. A game that has sublime gameplay and a remarkably strong narrative which can be finished in just a few hours has been completed by less than half of the people who own it. Telltale’s *The Walking Dead* is arguably the most story driven series of games there has ever been. Only 66% of people finished the first episode, and only 39% of people stayed on to the very end of season one to see what happened to Lee and Clementine. These numbers don’t account for people playing games offline,

but the actual percentages won’t differ too much. Games that aren’t narratively driven seem to be the best way forward in terms of replayability. The stats would suggest that there is a large group of people who don’t care about story the first time through, let alone after multiple playthroughs. Perhaps it would be more prudent to focus on creating a singular, fantastic experience, rather than diluting narrative further with ‘replayability’. In a story-driven game, variety can come in the form of customisation, not from playing through the campaign again with the rocket launcher unlocked at the start.



**Abtve** Drew Karpyshtyn started his writing career with *Baldur's Gate* and went on to pen *Mass Effect 1-3*.

## OVER ACHIEVEMENTS

→ The rewards of trophy hunting

■ **CURIOSITY CAN GET** the better of us when it comes to gaming. We see that interesting achievement on the list after finishing the game and suddenly have the urge to go back in and find out what it is. Ed Stern agrees: “It’s easy to be reflexively negative about achievements. I was about to say they don’t really work for me, but then that would completely ignore how many hours and mouse clicks I spent grinding away at *Modern Warfare* to unlock a slightly different paint scheme.” They’re also useful from a design perspective. “We use the achievements to influence how players feel

about game design. They can make great carrots on a stick to help people explore aspects of the game they might not otherwise get to.”

Thomas Grip has a mixed reaction to achievements. “They work really well when they reward digging deep into the game. It sucks when the achievements just lie on top of stuff that is rewarding. Research clearly shows that this just makes the players less excited about the reward. I also hate achievements that pop up at an emotional moment and destroy it. I even had an issue with *Heavy Rain* that showed them between scenes.”

→ NINTENDO WIFI CONNECTION CEASING OPERATION 20 MAY. 408 DS, DSI AND WII GAMES AFFECTED →





( OPINION )

## The Illusion Of Choice

Why games pretend to let you choose

→ Videogames stand out from other media formats because they cater for agency, immersion and dynamic involvement. Developers have been exploring how deep these systems reach for years, and a trend for incorporating morality systems surfaced as a result. But how significant are the choices we're offered, and do we really ever have a choice?

**E**nter *BioShock*, a game where your hand is held and you're guided through a city whose physical decay is matched only by the decay of its Objectivist morality. You have no choice in what you do – you're pushed forward through some innate desire to 'help' those that claim to be 'the good guys'. But as with anything in gaming, it's never really that simple. The morality at first appears black and white: Ryan is 'bad' – he's a megalomaniacal dictator that's piloted the wondrous city of Rapture into a complete nosedive. Fontaine is 'good' – he's fighting on behalf of the people, vying for a better tomorrow, breaking the chains of selfishness and elitism that have been choking Rapture since its inception.

This is indicative of the majority of games – morality, or the illusion of it, is binary. You are stuck between two immovable absolutes: good and evil, with incentives being granted for hitting the extremities of either side. *Mass Effect*, for all its winding narratives and forays into philosophical morality, ultimately comes down to the Paragon/Renegade choice. *inFamous: Second Son* asks you whether you'd rather work towards being a True Hero or being Infamous. The *Fallout* series, while certainly operating on a more flexible scale, still ushers you towards Good or Evil. There's rarely an incentive to travel the neutral path, to sit back and be the silent protagonist of times gone by, observing the chaos unfurl around you. And when you do decide to rebel against the moral majority, most games'

**Below** *Alpha Protocol* explored a middle ground between complete good and evil, revelling in the greyness in between.

incarnation of 'evil' treads the worn path of cartoon villainy – uber-violence or bust. You can't be a more cerebral kind of evil. You can't be lingo; you have to be Macbeth.

It's because, really, games offer the illusion of choice. No matter what you do – save those villagers, kill that innocent guy, rescue that kitten from that tree – everything has tangible (and scripted) consequences. The *Mass Effect* ending fiasco is a prime example of this – throughout the trilogy, you play through assuming every choice you make is being stored somewhere, saved up for an impactful payoff at the climax. But no – your reward is one of three endings. Even RPGs with multiple world states and endings filter down into a selection of absolutes. In RPGs, you assume





**Inset** When it comes to something as simple as 'press X for this emotion', the whole idea of player interaction seems phatic.

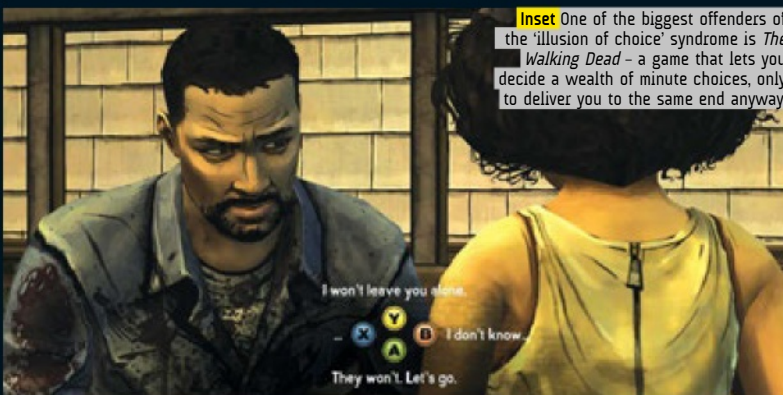
“ What if you, as a person, don't want to 'kill' or 'save'? What if you would rather imprison? What if you would rather recruit? ”

the role of your selected protagonist – but what if you, as a person, don't want to 'kill' or 'save'? What if you'd rather imprison? What if you'd rather recruit? Like the illusion of freedom we're given in *BioShock*, we aren't really playing a game that tests our morality – we're operating exactly as the writers and game designers want us to. They may as well be saying 'Would you kindly save or kill these people?'.

**GAMES LIKE THE** upcoming *Watch Dogs* are taking intentional steps to move the morality paradigm forward and, surprisingly enough, they're doing this by *not* measuring the decisions you make. When we got some hands-on with the game, we could have potentially drained a single mother's bank account as she struggled with looking after her sick child. We decided not to, because even though there weren't any tangible repercussions, we just *felt bad* about it. Had there been a meter in place, saying 'Oh, you stole from this innocent woman. -25 karma', we probably *would* have tapped the account. If we were working towards Chaotic Evil or some other final rank, we'd be motivated to wreak havoc on everyone and everything because there would be an endgame in mind. Left to our own devices, not being measured, we felt far more in the 'role' of our protagonist; we felt like we actually had more of a free, unscripted choice.

Games like *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* and *Dante's Inferno* received negative feedback for the transparent and tacked-on morality systems they incorporated – instead of a writer taking an active role and deciding they'll develop their protagonist in a certain way, they leave the choice down to the player. Chances are, the next 300 lines of the game will remain the same, no matter which dialogue option you chose back on Level 1. How many times have you booted up a conversation wheel again, selected a different option and been disappointed by the repeated, generic response?

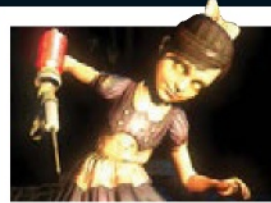
All games, to some degree, offer the illusion of choice – uninhibited games simply wouldn't work, because there would be no goal, no endgame, no motivation. But with morality systems, games tend to stick with what *Knights Of The Old Republic* was doing over a decade ago. This mechanic has seen little innovation since its inception, and it's a shame, because our interactive medium is one of the only pastimes that lets you revel in the anarchy of complete, unethical fantasy. Hopefully *Watch Dogs*, *The Witcher 3* and even smaller titles like *Bound By Flame* (previewed in this issue) can play with our perceptions of morality and breathe some new life into a system that may be beginning to stagnate – just a little.



**Inset** One of the biggest offenders of the 'illusion of choice' syndrome is *The Walking Dead* – a game that lets you decide a wealth of minute choices, only to deliver you to the same end anyway.

## TESTING THE MORAL COMPASS

➔ Although morality systems tend to be binary, the imposed moral coda the industry has produced has thrown up its share of incredible moments...



### BIOSHOCK'S LITTLE SISTERS

■ A perfect embodiment of *BioShock*'s Objectivist vs altruist thematic structure, the Little Sisters may have been creepy, unsettling and – frankly – off-putting, but did they

really deserve to be harvested for their sweet, sweet Adam? You could be all selfless about it, choosing to spare them, rather than rip them apart to feast on the sweet sea-slug magic within, but then that would put you on the back foot when powering up your Splicer-infused powers. Of course, you always had to get through 'Mr. Bubbles' first...



### FALLOUT 3'S DETONATING MEGATON

■ Good old Megaton – the city built around an unexploded nuclear bomb. 'What could possibly go wrong?' ask the denizens of the settlement. The

answer: you. You can go wrong. The Vault Dweller could be swayed by the dulcet tones of Mr Tenpenny and watch the resulting explosion from the safety of his towering balcony. He'd pay you – making slaughtering those innocents worth your while. Of course, if you took offence to that offer, you could always just let the Ghouls loose on Tenpenny and laugh at the poetic irony of it all...



### MASS EFFECT 2'S REWRITING THE HERETIC GETH

■ We loved the way *Mass Effect* touched upon the philosophies of cosmology and AI-related humanism. When we were

confronted with the choice of killing or rewriting the Geth, we were taken aback – according to the game's morality, 'rewriting' was more ethical than 'killing'. But is it really? Forcibly altering the collective consciousness of an entire species seems pretty dark – the Geth were devout, and surely some would have preferred death than living without their faith?

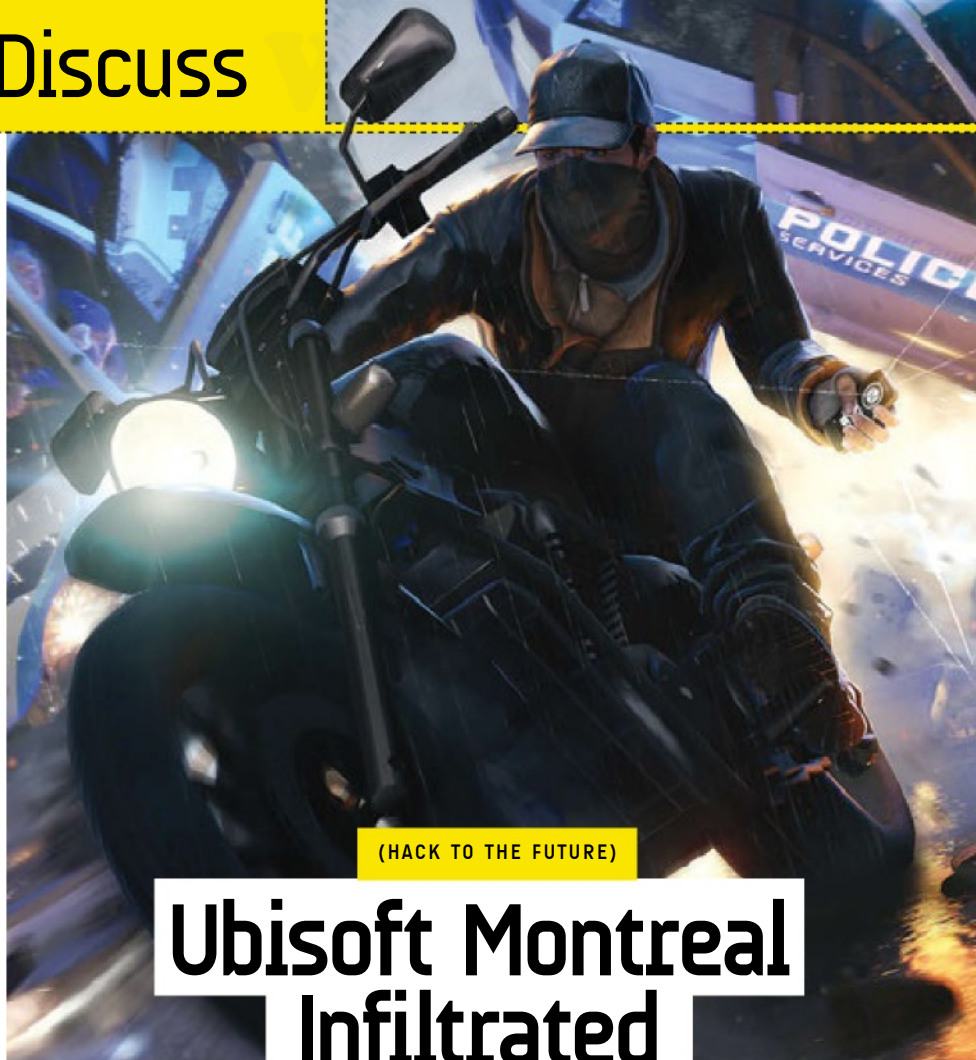


### FABLE II'S RAPID AGEING

■ At one point in *Fable II*, you were asked if you'd rather be the victim of a rapid aging process, or if you'd rather pass that fate on to a young, healthy woman in the height

of her youth. Almost everyone we knew chose to palm off the cruel destiny, wanting to merely appear young themselves for the entire game. We remember feeling pretty disgusted with ourselves for days afterwards; we made someone else utterly miserable, all for a few more virtual hours of feeling vain and attractive.





## Ubisoft Montreal Infiltrated

→ As Ubisoft Montreal's *Watch Dogs* edges closer to release, we chatted to creative director Jonathan Morin and lead game designer Danny Belanger about designing Chicago, an obsession with surveillance and real-world relevance...



**What level of impact has working alongside the *Assassin's* franchise had on the development of *Watch Dogs*?**

**JM:** We have heard this comparison from fans a couple of times; I guess it is normal considering both games come from the same studio. But when you look at it closely, the only real mechanic we share is contextual navigation. And even that is quite different in execution and feel. We wanted great foot chases and a better blend of navigation and gun-play for *Watch Dogs*. We wanted to offer a more natural and complete avatar for the open world genre. So our choices were more directed from those needs and not really from Ubisoft's past projects.

**Will the city of Chicago come into play on a gameplay level?**

**DB:** Verticality definitely plays a major role in *Watch Dogs*' gameplay. Aiden Pearce is very agile and is able to climb up vertical surfaces. He can also Hack forklifts or scissor lifts to reach higher grounds. This has a major impact when it comes to selecting an

**Below** Protagonist Aiden Pearce can navigate the world on foot or by vehicular means.



**D**o you think *Watch Dogs* is a story that could only have been told today?

**JM:** *Watch Dogs* is a game that explores the impact of technology in our society. Privacy and paranoia are indeed parts of our themes but at heart it is a look at human beings and their relation with evolution. It would be hard for us to be more relevant than we are now that is for sure. But when you think about it, the debate surrounding democratisation of knowledge has been around forever. There's been the emergence of printing and then public libraries. In the end, they generated debates that are in so many ways similar to the idea of controlling the internet or the discussions surrounding Julian Assange and Edward Snowden. So while I think it is a great time to tell this story, I also believe it is the kind of themes we periodically need to be reminded

of in order to make the right choices as a society. If *Watch Dogs* can feed the discussion even just a little I would see it as a great success.

**Where do you see Aiden fitting into the evolution of gaming protagonists?**

**JM:** Aiden Pearce is a man who is kind of obsessed with surveillance and protection. He monitors his family 24/7 without them knowing, just to protect them from something that happened in the past. But unfortunately, his family will get in danger once again and for the first time, he will have to push his limits and take justice into his own hands. He will become slowly but surely a modern vigilante hero. It is important to say that he is not a super hero from the Seventies with a cape; he is just a real man, and he will have to deal with all the repercussions of his actions.





## Beneath the Surface

→ The senior producer on exploring Chicago

■ "IN WATCH DOGS players will have many opportunities to explore Chicago. We considered the various dimensions of the city when we built it: the street level, interiors, but also how Aiden can explore remote areas, back alleys, even the building's rooftops. Also, Chicago has a large underground city that we are leveraging. Finally, remember: players can explore the physical side of the city of Chicago, but also its entire digital layer, invading the privacy of its citizens. Aiden can get into interiors physically, but also by tapping into his ability to access and control any computer in the city..." says Dominic Guay.

approach to a mission as it gives the player great freedom to plan an attack. There are also many exploration gameplay that involve the use of verticality such as cTOS Towers and finding the right position to decipher QR codes using camera. Furthermore, the use of heights in Online Hacking and Tailing gameplays will provide a massive advantage to players clever enough to use it!

### So why did you choose Chicago over everywhere else in the US?

**JM:** Chicago is one of the world's great cities. From its inception to today, it symbolises modernity and progress alongside crime and corruption; great wealth and high culture alongside abject poverty and brutal violence. Those contradictions make Chicago the perfect location for our contemporary open-world game. Another key element for us was to have an accurate depiction of landmarks and architecture. If you've been to Chicago, you will have many déjà-vu moments. The stories the player will be able to tap into as they monitor everything and everyone will also be a reflection of the real Chicago of today. We believe the addition of such little things is part of the reason why the response to our game is so strong. In the end, players care as much as we do about details within their experiences.



**Above** Aiden just comes across as anti-social to all his acquaintances, he's always on that bloody phone.



**Above** There will be a wide degree of urban exploration in the game.



**Above** The focus on 'blending navigation and gun-play' has us intrigued.



Image courtesy of BA (Hons) Digital Arts student Matthew Sellens

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→ METRO REDUX CONFIRMED FOR XBOX ONE/PS4 →

# the #TRENDING

with NowGamer.com's Ryan King

## Next-Gen Hasn't Happened Yet



Those of you who were around for the birth of Xbox 360 will remember the *Call Of Duty 2* demo pods. Blaring Thompson

gunfire and death screams cacophony above the noise of parents shouting at their kids in Gamestation, the demo pods didn't ask for attention. They demanded it. The party trick that really blew everyone away was when a smoke grenade went off in the midst of the mayhem – thick, choking smoke billowing out from a tiny canister until all you could see were enormous tufts of grey that looked real enough to touch.

It wasn't much in gameplay terms – it was just smoke, after all – but this was more about the next-gen sorcery that conjured up such an image. Watching players run in and out of the smoke was like watching a dog paw at a mirror. Even if we couldn't quite understand what we were looking at, we knew we were witnessing something exciting, different and intriguing. If this shiny new machine could do *this* sort of voodoo magic, what else could it do? What if it managed this sort of trickery over an *entire game*?

It was that naïve sense of wonder that drove the promise of what games would come with the dawn of the 360-led generation of hardware and sadly, that has now been eroded by how the industry itself has changed. There's little room left for speculation, promise or



■ The smoke effects that heralded the start of Xbox 360's life.



Even Titanfall had its impact neutered by its delayed Xbox 360 release and a PC release that undermines any argument for owning an Xbox One

potential when games are beaten to within an inch of their lives before they limp onto the shop shelves or digital storefronts – leaked screens, announcements of announcements, reveal trailers, cast announcements, multiplayer reveals, pre-order initiatives, launch trailers, season passes, pre-embargo streams from leaked copies, post-embargo Let's Play videos. Is it any wonder that we're no longer wowed by games like we used to be? Is it any surprise we now have almost impossible expectations for something to dazzle us in the way a simple smoke grenade could?

That's why the PS4 and Xbox One didn't have their *Call Of Duty 2* moment when they launched and why they're both still searching for that moment now. The excuse heard on various forums and from industry mouths is that the upgrade in hardware isn't as significant as it was when Xbox jumped to 360 or when PS2 jumped to PS3. That's true but it downplays other factors that have muted the impact of next-gen console launches – the strides made by PC that make it hard for consoles to impress visually, the failure of Kinect and Move to connect with their audience and that there's nothing new to rival the impact Xbox Live and PSN made with online play.

And quite simply, the games aren't there yet. The likes of *Dead Rising 3*, *Forza*

*Motorsport 5*, *Killzone: Shadow Fall* and *InFamous: Second Son* are good but they're merely offering shinier new offerings on series that were showing tired legs towards the end of last-gen. Even *Titanfall* – the closest this generation has to its first 'Fuck me...' moment – had its impact neutered by its delayed Xbox 360 release and a PC release that undermines any argument for why you must own an Xbox One (pedants will argue that *Call Of Duty 2* was also released on PC, which is true, but the console vs. PC battleground is a significantly different battleground now compared to 2005.)

As an Xbox One owner myself, I still find myself going back to PS3 and Xbox 360 too often, given I have Microsoft's vision of the future sitting under my TV. I've just unlocked the Platinum for *Beyond: Two Souls*, completed *Spec Ops: The Line* (great game – play it if you haven't already) and bought *Radiant Silvergun*. Next-gen has become current-gen but we're still waiting for an excuse to jump in and start playing. Hopefully Microsoft and Sony can deliver some compelling reasons at E3.

Ryan King is editor of

**NowGamer.com**



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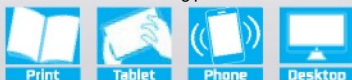


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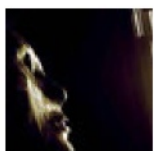
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# COAST TO COAST

with Gray Nicholson

## Home is where the games are



**When do you abandon one machine and move to the next?** When do you decide, okay, that's all I'll get out of this box, it has no more to offer, time to go?

At each previous transition, I'd have answered, "As soon as possible!" because the outgoing generation was always stale and played out before the new kit appeared. Its limitations dispiritingly obvious, all tricks performed a thousand times, crying out for an upgrade that would blow the walls off our confinement. And because, when you're younger, you're more easily excited by the new box itself, without considering how the grade of entertainment may be lowered. Playing inelegant, cobbled together launch games for six months because they're on the new box! Switch too early and that's your prize: the novelty of new hardware with its sexy foreign controller, fresh UI, and hints of what may be possible in a year or two, told via middling games produced during a transitional phase.

The quality has been so good in the 360/PS3 era that this tradeoff is not appealing. We might



■ Until the next-gen equivalent of a new *XCOM* comes along, some will stick with what they have.



We've enjoyed such abundance that many of us have backlogs: awaiting a drought or a mood yet to strike

have exhausted what's possible in frame-rates, smoke effects, and simultaneous players, but how long before the new boxes attain strategy as engrossing as *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, fantasy as wondrous as *Skyrim*, puzzles as slick and ingenious as *Portal 2*, open worlds as rich as *Red Dead Redemption* or *GTA*? We've enjoyed such abundance that many of us have backlogs: shrink-wrapped boxes and un-launched downloads awaiting a drought or mood yet to strike. We have a surplus of entertainment, not a deficit – hardly conducive to an overhaul. We've had it too good this time to trade all these for *Shiny Racer* and *Breathless Deathmatch* in the name of progress, making the business of picking a time to leap more confusing than before.

And it is a leap. Experience has taught me that no matter how fondly I recall a platform, how strongly I feel about losing touch with this or that

game, once I make the jump I don't return. It's like moving house; as much history as you have, you commit to the new place, never think about popping back to your old flat for a sandwich.

Switch too late and, well, *can* you switch too late? The longer you push it, the broader and stronger the library grows for that next machine. The farther the system updates go to address unfathomable oversights that would have driven you bonkers. The more online services stabilise and expand. Maybe, like with that old house, there's a degree of emotional attachment making the move difficult. After an unusually long hardware cycle, it is, daftly enough, going to feel a bit choky doing some things for the last time. Do you select a final Achievement or Trophy to unlock, knowing that it will live on as such in some database? Pick a special game to play last, in some small ceremony of laying to rest? Oh god, it's not like moving house, is it? It's euthanasia!

A lot of people caught at this junction are waiting for next-gen versions of *GTA V* (still only at rumour stage) and *Minecraft*, (confirmed but, at the time of writing, undated) before committing. A pair of open-world essentials so engrossing, so brimming with possibility, that it seems frankly barmy to leave them behind for early-gen filler. These stallers are thinking about the end result, rather than the empty rush of new hardware, and I think they provide the answer to the original question. When do you switch? When the quality of games at least matches what you have today.

Gray Nicholson is a former videogames journalist who now resides in America, acknowledging his roots as he sees fit





## Five Things About Wolfenstein: The New Order

There are few counterfactuals as chilling as that which posits the Nazis as the victors of World War II. Thankfully there's a fictional hero who specialises in rewriting the alternative history books when it comes to matters of National Socialism, B.J. Blazkowicz...

### 1 The original FPS returns

Id software's *Wolfenstein 3D* in 1992 not only established the template on which all future shooters would be based, it pushed the capabilities and speed of 3D graphics long before hardware acceleration revolutionised the nascent genre still further. Of course by default, being the first ever shooter makes *Wolfenstein* also the longest running series.

### 2 A sequel that's lost its memory

*Wolfenstein* has never really had a sequential successor, with most of the games updating or expanding upon the gameplay of the last. *The New Order* is the first game to directly follow on from the events of its predecessor, in that it's post-1945 with William "B.J." Blazkowicz returning to fight the

Nazi menace after an enforced lay-off due to battle-induced amnesia in now the swinging Sixties.

### 3 Super Soldiers abound

It's not a proper *Wolfenstein* game without the SS, which is to say Super Soldiers. The good news is that *The New Order* has legions of stahlhelmed cybernetic enemies, with their direct and often suicidal attacks meaning you'll have to pack plenty of ammo to bring them down. Or you can pick up mounted machine guns and spray the walls with gay abandon.

### 4 It's old school new

Health packs, one firing mode, hidden ammo, pantomime German accents, a meaty shotgun, no multiplayer – *The New Order* is as old school as it's

possible for a next-gen shooter to be without breaking out the Build Engine. That said, the deference to modern tech and gameplay is abundant, as you might expect from a studio with *Riddick* on its CV.

### 5 Buy early and get *Doom*

Bethesda would like you to preorder *The New Order* and is willing to let you in on the *Doom 4* beta in order to tempt you further. Unfortunately the publisher hasn't elaborated what kind of beta it will be, on what platforms, or when access will commence. 2015, most likely. Multiplayer-only, almost certainly. Vague promises aside it's not a bad incentive. It certainly beats a selection of bad hats, but of course we'd suggest waiting for our review next issue.



# The Gaming BAFTAs

→ The Gaming BAFTAs were held at last month, and among the winners we saw *Grand Theft Auto V* pick up Best British Game and Best Multiplayer. We saw *BioShock Infinite* grab Best Original Score, *Papers, Please* got Best Strategy/Simulator, *Gone Home* received Best Newcomer and – surprising no-one – *The Last Of Us* grabbed three awards, including Best Game. That's a good spread, right?

But our question to you this month was – do you think awards ceremonies like this matter in our industry?

Do you pay attention to winners/losers and do they inform your purchases post-show?

■ Whether or not you agree with the nominations/wins is irrelevant. A BAFTA is the most prestigious award a game can receive and it is important that the industry/public recognise the accomplishments games have made.

Thomas Marshall, Facebook

■ If I don't know a game, I check it out. If I like what I see, I play it. Those awards usually go to games I already know, so no, they don't matter at all.

Werner Enz, Facebook

■ I enjoy the spectacle of an award ceremony and they certainly play a

role in my consumer choices. Last year's gaming BAFTAs led me to discover *Journey*, *The Room* and *New Star Soccer*. As a PC gamer, I probably wouldn't have bothered looking at titles on less familiar gaming platforms had it not been for the accolades they received. I may well do the same again this year, but I haven't watched the ceremony yet to see what catches my eye.

Mathew James Westhorpe, Facebook

■ The awards are important for the developers themselves. A lovely thank you from the industry to

acknowledge their fine work!

@raceforthesun, Twitter

■ It's nice to honour the best (or supposed best) of the gaming industry, but awards have never impacted my buying decisions etc.

@srynhart, Twitter

■ As a journalist and a gamer of over two decades I'm always interested to see what the panels think and the reaction from the press.

@JamesKnack, Twitter

■ Awards serve no purpose other than to make people feel that more

people care about their trade than actually do, sadly.

Mark Reid, Facebook

■ Not really - in the same way that Oscar Nominations and Wins don't hold any credence over what movies I watch. It is nice to see game get recognition, of course, but you don't see 'From BAFTA-winning team X, comes a new game' taglines on things. Like the movie industry, there's always givens with blockbuster titles and a couple of indie darlings, but they're never indicative of the industry as a whole.

Sorin Annuar, Facebook



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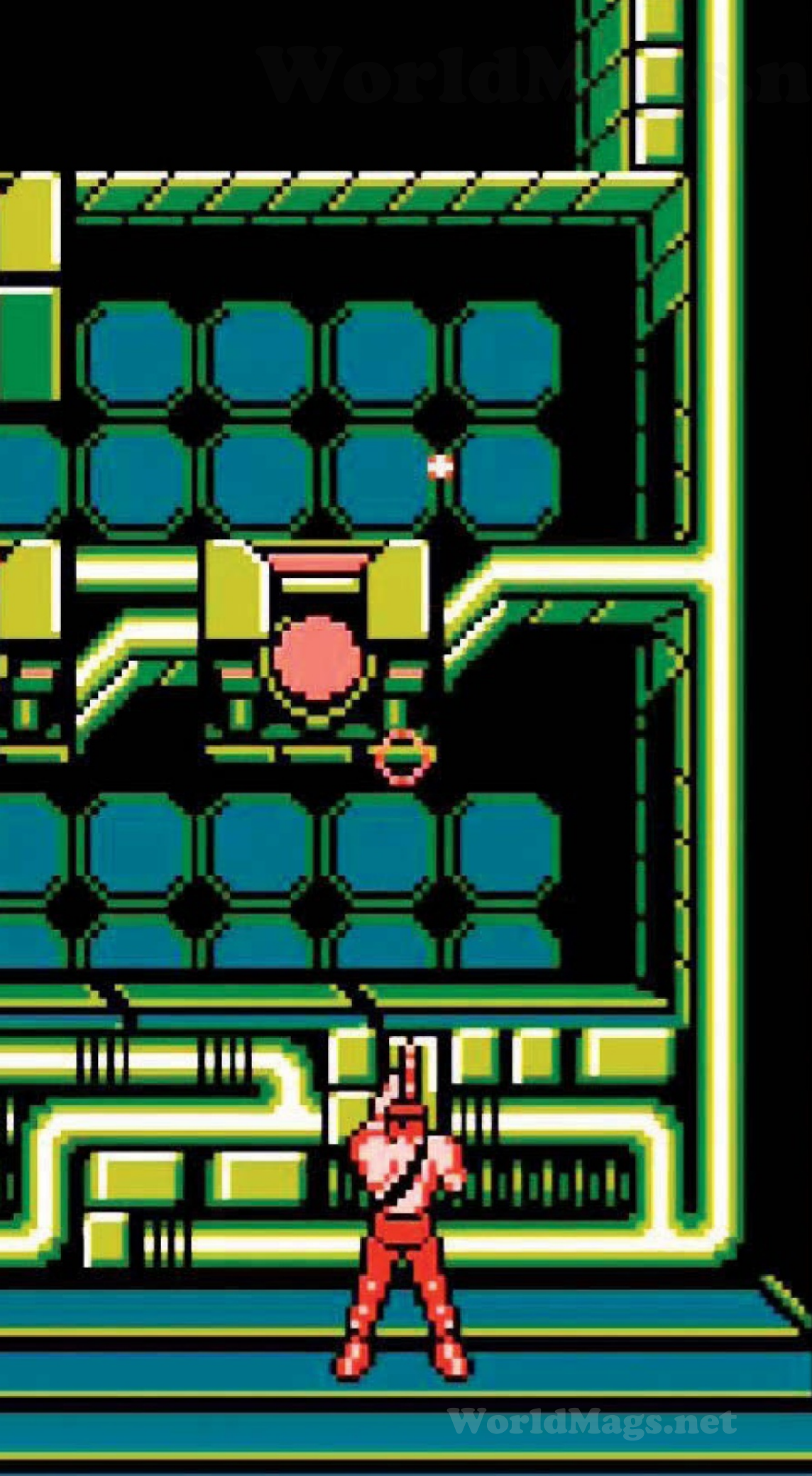


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“Me and my brother would play it and we’d be like ‘Who’s going to be Arnie, who’s going to be Stallone?’”


CLAUDIO SANCHEZ, MUSICIAN & WRITER





## WHY I ... Contra

CLAUDIO SANCHEZ, MUSICIAN FOR COHEED AND CAMBRIA/CREATOR OF GRAPHIC NOVEL THE AMORY WARS: FALL OF THE KEYWORK

**6** When I was a kid in the Eighties, action heroes were the thing - like Stallone in Rambo, Schwarzenegger in Commando, y'know? I think Contra felt like getting those two identities together; the characters sorta looked like them, right? One of them had the blonde hair crew-cut, and the other had this long bluish-black hair. Me and my brother would play it and we'd be like 'Who's going to be Arnie, who's going to be Stallone?' I like the game because I always wanted to see those two guys in an action movie together, and even though those guys weren't them, you could pretend they were in this cool, science fiction alien apocalypse videogame. Between the lasers and the guns you could gather, you always had a favourite: when I saw the 'L' or the 'S', I always got so excited. It looked great for an 8-bit game, too. Contra was a great game back then, and still is to this day. 







# OCULAR SHIFT

VR GAMING HAS BEEN STUCK IN A VIRTUAL TIME WARP, HOWEVER, WITH THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF SONY'S PROJECT MORPHEUS AND THE DRAMATIC ACQUISITION OF OCULUS RIFT, THE FUTURE MIGHT BE CLOSER THAN WE THOUGHT. **GAMES™** HEARS FROM SONY, SITS DOWN WITH POST-FACEBOOK OCULUS AND DISCUSSES THE PAST-TINTED FUTURE...

**A**s intrigued and excited as we've been by the Oculus Rift head-mounted display, the Kickstarted virtual reality tech had until recently felt like a last ditch attempt by the PC illuminati to regain the technological high ground. Having seen the first-person shooter, online gaming and social integration become established (and arguably more evolved) across the leading consoles over the last decade or so, Oculus VR's efforts seemed to represent a move towards a new frontier that the PC could set aside for itself; one that only a relative few need flock to for the seeds of mainstream adoption to take root. Sure, it might fail just as easily as it might thrive, but it wouldn't completely die out as emergent technologies often do when the big

consoles get involved and things don't quite work out.

On this occasion VR has moved from being an intriguing and exciting PC-only expedition to multi-format Next Big Thing in a very short space of time. Ahead of its monolithic console rivals, Sony has jumped aboard the virtual reality bandwagon and made a dash for VR's wild frontier – not in five years, when perhaps the PS4 would be in line for retirement, but effective immediately. Revealed at San Francisco's Games Developers Conference, Sony's neon-lit VR hat, Project Morpheus, was shown to be more than just a concept, but a working technology every bit as evolved as the Oculus Rift has become since being demonstrated with considerably less fanfare in 2012. With Morpheus already in the hands of some developers and dev kits said to be heading out imminently, it seems that just as Oculus VR was pitching its tent, Sony has

thundered in and circled the wagons. Then, in a move that seems to have surprised everyone, the crowd-funded tech pilgrims found themselves part of an almighty alliance. Barely had the dust settled on Sony's VR intentions and Oculus' counter-revelation of a new VR development kit than legions of Facebook stormtroopers suddenly parachute in, clouding the sky.

With strong evidence that Microsoft and a number of other manufacturers are looking to annex a substantial piece of gaming's virtual utopia, the battle for next-gen dominance looks like it could not only go pan-dimensional, but escalate into an arms race that goes beyond the borders of gaming. That's assuming those of us watching the exodus of hardware innovation care enough to pick a side. Back home in flat-space there are *Batmans* and *Assassin's Creeds* to concern ourselves with, after all. »

AR  
VS  
VRWHAT'S THE  
DIFFERENCE?

While the two realities are often used interchangeably, augmented and virtual are fundamentally different. Compare your unconscious night time dreaming with all its projected terrors and weirdness with your subconscious meandering on the bus or in a board meeting, where you remain vaguely aware of what's going on around you while thinking about what to have for dinner – that's the difference. Of course thanks to future technology you can have both at the same time. Stick a camera on a VR headset through which the real world can be superimposed and you have AR with your VR. Or, slide your smart phone into a Pispex blindfold (as is being attempted with the Durovis Dive, vrAse and Altergaze) and you get VR with your AR. Clear now?



“Gaming's New World has always been there, of course, it's just that all attempts to reach it have ended in disaster and ruin. First developed in the research labs of the Sixties, it wasn't until the late Eighties and early Nineties that the idea of trackable head-mounted displays became feasible for consumer use. Until then 3D – which is to say a stereoscopic game view – was largely a Fifties movie theatre gimmick, resurrected successfully by Tomy for its 1983 range of LCD handhelds. It wasn't until 1992 and the installation of Virtuality's bulky VR machines to arcades hungry for novel new ideas that the virtual dream beloved of cyberpunk fiction became partway realised. Andy Tudor, creative director at Slightly Mad Studios (then a destitute student) was among the first in line at London's Trocadero to be 'jacked in' to cyberspace: "I remember playing something involving walking along a chequered floor holding a cup and saucer. Engaging stuff, right! It's harsh to say it was terrible at the time; even in those olden days of VR you were able to step into a completely different world and be totally enveloped by it.”

Unfortunately Virtuality's crude polygons were unable to evolve quickly enough to come close to the expectation that had been fostered through movies like *Total Recall* and *Lawnmower Man*. While 3D gaming was ascendant and the hardware was racing ahead to meet it, it was a new round of consoles/hardware-accelerated PCs that were better placed to capitalise on the immersive qualities of *Doom* et al, for which gamers were happy to retreat back to TVs and monitors rather

than don an expensive, uncomfortable headset. Despite the vast resources of a Nintendo at the peak of its powers and significant investments from Sega and Atari in their own VR technologies, a succession of increasingly throwaway headsets came and went.

“At Bullfrog in the mid Nineties we received a lot of VR headsets,” remembers Mike Diskett, then the lead programmer on *Syndicate Wars*. “In fact we had store rooms stacked high with them. They briefly came to market and failed hard because the display technology of the time was terrible, I think it was tiny CRT-style screens with mirrors and lenses, with a display resolution of 320x240 per eye and a field of view of less than 90 degrees. The lag was terrible. They did give a taste of what it could be like in the future, but it's been a long time coming.” By 1997, virtual reality had become a term of derision among gamers and its application withdrew from entertainment altogether, returning to the industrial research labs from whence it came. While a number of manufacturers continued to produce HMDs, most were pitched at the industrial, military, medical and research sectors, or in the case of Sony's 2011 Daft Punk-esque HMZ T1, as a “personal 3D viewer”.



● Slightly Mad Studios recently announced a Morpheus edition of *Project Cars*.

It was around the start of 2012 that VR's gaming associations were reestablished; after an online meeting between id Software's John Carmack, architect of *Doom*, and retro VR collector Palmer Luckey. Both had been working on VR technologies in relative isolation, but after Carmack got his hands on Luckey's gaffer-taped *Rift* prototype he saw enough potential to demonstrate the unit at E3 that following June, using a modified version of *Doom 3* to wow the crowds. Blown away from the response to what was widely assumed to be Carmack's solo project, Luckey prepared to launch a modest Kickstarter campaign while Carmack returned to his desk

“At Bullfrog in the Nineties we received a lot of VR headsets. In fact we had storerooms stacked high with them. They failed hard”

to ponder his future. When the Kickstarter launched in August, it reached its \$250,000 goal within 24 hours, securing by the end of the campaign almost \$2.5m in crowd-sourced funding thanks, in part, due to ringing endorsements from Carmack, as well as Epic's Cliff Bleszinski and Valve's Gabe Newell, not to mention the promise of imminent VR adaptations for *Doom 3*, mech shooter *Hawken* and *Team Fortress 2*.

Meanwhile, at the Tokyo Games Show a few days later, Sony hinted at its future interest in VR by demonstrating a new version of its HMZ headset with the on board tracking necessary to turn the space age iPod into a dedicated VR platform. In May, as the future Oculus colleagues were preparing for E3, Sony had attached a Move controller to its old HMZ to promote a VR version of PSN game *Datura*. As Sony Worldwide Studios President Shuhei Yoshida later recounted, the jury-rigged HMZ with its narrow viewing angle “was not exactly the total immersion that we wanted, but it was enough to show us the potential of VR for games.” Not that the gaming press seemed to take much notice of Sony's parallel efforts, hungry as it was to feed on scraps of news that



● Valve's support of Oculus VR recently stretched to handing over Michael Abrash.



● *Eve: Valkyrie* will go down in history as the first multi-platform VR game.





● The new Oculus Rift development kit will set you back just \$350.

might reveal the nature of an expected PS4 rather than likely-more distant future peripherals. Naturally Sony too was disinclined to elaborate further for conversely similar reasons.

The first orders for Oculus Rift dev kits were made in September 2012, initially at a rate of 300 a minute.

Three months later with almost \$80m of new funding, Oculus VR had the financial resources to process the tens of thousands of orders that had been stacking up. However it wasn't until March 2013 that the first models shipped, a significant number bound for Iceland, the home of *Eve Online* developer CCP Games, where a skeleton crew had put together a technology demo for a first-person space combat game, supposedly to delight

and entertain attendees to *Eve's* annual Fanfest. The response to the demo, a simple 6v6 dogfighting game, was overwhelmingly positive, with attendees happy to forgo the traditional circuit of presentations and gameplay reveals in order to sneak one more go of the impressive arcade shooter. For many who sampled the game it was their first taste of VR, and many were determined it wouldn't be their last.

Such was the sudden interest in CCP's project that it was moved into full production and a team assembled, soon to be headed by Owen O'Brien, previously responsible for EA's *Mirror's Edge*. Formally unveiled a few weeks later *Eve: Valkyrie* was assigned killer app status and won a clutch of Best Of E3 awards, garnering almost as much attention as the first public sightings »



● In the Nineties of pre-Blair Britain this was as good as VR gaming ever got.

## WHAT YOU'LL NEED



### CONTROLLER

● Any controller you currently use for PC or PS4 will work once you unpack your headset. Of course you won't be able to see it unless there's some clever AR mapping undertaken, which will put the keyboard and mouse brigade at a disadvantage. What we're really looking forward to is dusting off a Move.



### HEAD-MOUNTED DISPLAY

● This once-cumbersome and now surprisingly comfortable gaming hat is where the bulk of the required technology resides; screens (1080p OLED in the case of the DK2), optics (90-degree FOV minimum), audio, on-board tracking, possibly a camera for AR functionality.



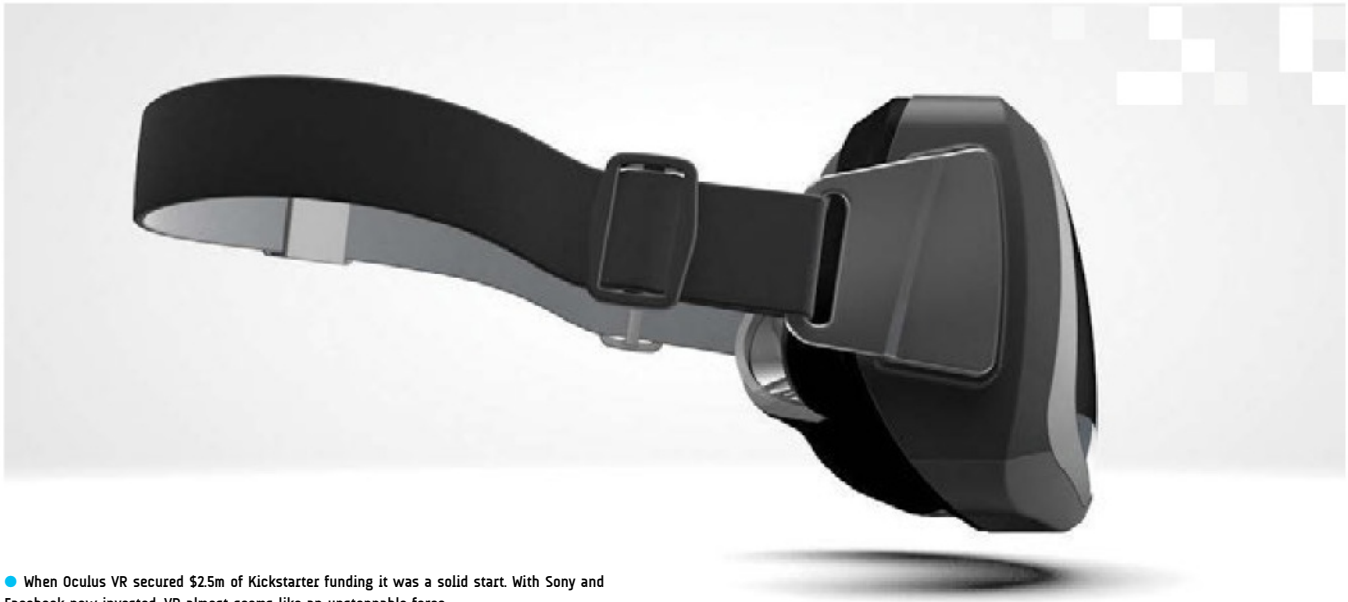
### TRACKING

● Old school VR and even the first Oculus dev kit relied on on-board tracking systems – gyroscopes and accelerometers – in the HMD itself. The new DK2 and Morpheus additionally use cameras and electromagnetic sensors in a separate unit, useful for detecting depth movements.



### TREADMILLS

● By its nature VR is about taking gaming to another level, in which case why not take VR up a notch as well? There are two gaming omni-directional treadmills in development, the most well-known being the Virtuix Omni. Slightly less practical is the VirtuSphere, effectively a 10-foot high hamster ball.



● When Oculus VR secured \$25m of Kickstarter funding it was a solid start. With Sony and Facebook now invested, VR almost seems like an unstoppable force.

» of the next-gen consoles. Unconsciously CCP found itself ahead of a pack of developers keen to take full advantage of VR for the first time in a generation. With the likes of Valve, Epic and other 3D engine creators pledging their support and third-party drivers being produced that provided basic VR functionality for established blockbusters like *Mass Effect 3* and *Bioshock Infinite*, the \$300 Rift was rapidly becoming a must-have piece of kit before it had even been launched.

"What's different today is that affordable tech has caught up with the promise of VR" says *Eve*: *Valkyrie* executive producer O'Brien. Diskett agrees: "It's a whole different ball game now. 1080p 5-inch screens are mass-produced for phones making the display hardware incredibly cheap and light. Motion sensors are again everywhere with single chip solutions, [while] the power of today's GPU's can produce amazing visuals across two displays at high frame rates. The technology has converged from all sides to make it come together at this point in time."

For Sony, keen to ensure its VR technology is able to gain widespread adoption, the difference between its current VR efforts and those of others previously is that its approach has been as much driven by design outlook as technology. "Our philosophy for VR is really that it's a medium not a peripheral," stated SCE's Research & Development engineer Anton Mikhailov shortly after the reveal of Project Morpheus. "What I mean by new medium is that a lot of the rules that you're used to in game design just simply don't apply. In many cases presence trumps game design; it's much more important to have your game deliver a sense of presence than it is to conform to a given genre."

Presence or spatial immersion – the sense of being in the game – is a concept talked about by almost everyone involved in VR development and one most seem to agree is as integral to VR as gameplay is to gaming itself. The problem that the advocates at Sony, Oculus, Valve and elsewhere recognise is that to achieve adequate presence, the balance of technology and design in terms of visuals and audio has to be in harmony with complex tracking data, controls, interface and ergonomics, not to mention the quality of games driving us to the tech in the first place. If one aspect is out of whack, the illusion evaporates. "Presence is hard to achieve, that's why it hasn't happened for so long" said Sony's Richard



● Slightly Mad's Andy Tudor remembers Nineties VR well.

Marks at GDC. "We need to deliver a really rich experience to our richest two senses. We need the whole virtual world to respond in a natural way when you move your head around. We need to be able to interact with that world, reach out into it and then we need to do all this in a very easy to use approachable manner. Of course finally we need to have the right content for it."

On the matter of game graphics it isn't just enough to split an image into two, scale and perspective has to be realigned to suit the new wraparound reality. Even more important is the collaboration between graphics and tracking that govern head motion to help ensure players not only obtain a sense of self in the virtual space, but avoid motion sickness. Enforced cutscenes and locked first-person views that are so prevalent in cinematic shooters like *Call Of Duty* might well cause VR-enabled players to gag into their visors.

By all accounts the specifications of the Project Morpheus HMD and the latest iteration of the Oculus Rift dev kit are remarkably similar and are predicted to remain closely aligned until their respective launches, largely because both systems are aiming to achieve the same ideal levels of presence at comparable cost with regards to the necessary components. As with all developing consumer technology, there's



● Richard Marks says Sony has worked hard to nail VR sound, sight, control, tracking, content and ease of use.



a delicate balance to be made between what's possible and what the user is willing to pay for.

While the optics and screen tech in both imminent VR units are largely comparable, the head and control tracking systems of the Sony and Oculus systems are more distinct from one another and it's here that Sony seems to have an advantage, not just because the Rift uses a single lens PC camera to track head movement, while the Morpheus relies on the dual lenses of the depth-sensing Playstation Camera, but that the Move motion controller and the DualShock 4 pad use the same tracking infrastructure.

Reluctantly, Oculus VR's Nate Mitchell, VP of product, acknowledges Sony's advantage. "Input is so critical," he says. I think that is one area where [Sony] have a leg up on Oculus. The Move, for all of its faults, is pretty good. It has

**"VR is a medium, not a peripheral. A lot of the rules that you're used to in game design just simply don't apply"**

very good tracking. And I think they're going to be able to do a lot of unique stuff with the Move, similar to the things that people have been doing with the Razer Hydra on the PC side. Input is one of the most exciting challenges facing VR, it's something we're investigating."

"Hardware-wise, the average gamer will likely not notice a difference between the different headsets" says Andy Tudor, since recovered from his Nineties Virtuality experience and now overseeing the creative effort on Project Cars, due to support both Oculus Rift and Project Morpheus. "From a development point of view, as with other hardware, if both are pretty comparable then it just comes down to usual factors – which is easier to develop for, or which is more extensive, or which has better support." For the majority of indie developers working to add VR support to their games, the concern is less about the hardware differences between Morpheus and Rift and more to do with how well the third-party engines like Unreal, Unity and CryEngine support the hardware.

"It's incredibly simple to get started with the Rift in existing game engines, as the warp shaders that wrap the image around the eye properly are already set up for you" says David Smith, programmer and designer of recently released first-person adventure *Ether One*. "There are also plenty of working examples out there, and that's great when you want to get your implementation prototyped as quickly as possible. With Morpheus, I'd hope for a very similar SDK which allows for quick calibration and integration, but time will tell."

If there's one single area that almost every developer we've spoken to has had problems getting their heads around, it's with designing a VR-appropriate user interface or in-game display. "A lot of best practices that have been honed to an art form in 2D simply do not work in VR," says CCP's O'Brien, highlighting that the most fundamental issue that developers have to be aware of is in how the visual interface is displayed. It's a problem the developers of the most recent VR releases are all too aware of. *Ether One*, for example, features in-game

# EYE-VOLUTION



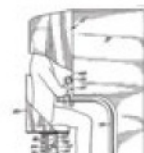
## 1849 LENTICULAR STEREOSCOPE

Charles Wheatstone invented stereoscopes in 1838. What his competitor David Brewster did was use lenses rather than mirrors to reduce the size of the device so that it could be hand-held. Conceivably it could have been strapped to one's face as well.



## 1939 VIEW-MASTER

For fifty years the humble View-Master was the closest most people ever got to witnessing the immersive power of 3D vision. Every kid had one and was invariably disappointed with each new reel they clicked through.



## 1962 SENSORAMA

These days they call it 4D (aka a 3D movie with a hairdryer and an old mop under each seat), but back in 1962 "Experience Theater" was achieved by the Sensorama. The patented photo booth-like device offered 3D motion picture views, body tilting and a facility to trigger wind and smells.

1849

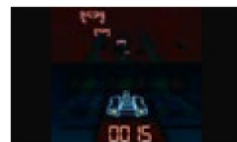
1939

1962



## 1955 NASA VIEW

In space no-one can hear you scream when you accidentally let go of a screw that goes shooting towards Neptune leaving a billion-dollar satellite uselessly orbiting the Earth. There are no practise runs in space, hence why NASA have been at the forefront of VR.



## 1983 TOMMYTRONIC 3-D SKY ATTACK

In the carefree days of Eighties copyright law, Tommytronic was able to be 'inspired' by *Tron*'s iconic tank battles and not be taken to court by Disney. It wasn't VR, more like a next-gen View-Master, but no one seemed to care.



## 1983 THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

Not only the very first VR head-mounted display to relay computer-generated graphics and require head tracking, The Sword Of Damocles (so named for its imposing mechanical arm), also had the best name.

1985

1983

1968



## 1995 VIRTUAL BOY

Of all the attempts at consumer VR in the Nineties, none were as disastrous as that which Nintendo undertook. The odd freestanding device offered only monochrome graphics and a weak selection of games.



## 1996 JAGUAR VR

While the poor reception for the Virtual Boy caused Sega to scale back its VR efforts, Atari was emboldened to expand theirs. Via a collaboration with Virtuality, the Jaguar VR headset almost made it past the prototype stage, were it not for the inevitable demise of its host console.



## 2000 VFX3D

There were a number of VR headsets released for the PC during the mid-Nineties, the best of them being the Forte VFX-1, which with its flip-up Smart Visor almost looked cool. Unfortunately it came too late to save VR, much like its 2000 successor.

1995

1996

2000



## 2011 HMZ-T1

Sony has been quietly developing personal 3D viewers for years, starting with Glasstron in 1997. The current evolution of the series is HMZ, the current version of which, the T3W, offers two 1280x720 OLED screens.



## 2000 Z800 3DVISOR

Making high-end VR gear used in everything from motion capture to commercial VR simulators, Virtual Realities Ltd. make a modest headset for gamers too. Unfortunately it costs over \$1500.

2011

2005

notes to flesh out details, which the development team had great difficulty implementing due to the poor resolution of the first Rift dev kits and the only readable portion of the screen being in the centre of the player's view. "With the improved resolution of the new developer kit this may become less of a problem" says Smith, "but it's better to use as few HUD elements as possible and find other ways to represent the information that the player needs to know in 3D, like the health bar on Isaac's spine from *Dead Space*."

For Mike Diskett and the team at 5 Lives Studios, currently working on the *Syndicate*-inspired *Satellite Reign*, the UI offers a more distinct challenge, for whilst most VR games have focused on a first-person view to help eliminate information overlay, the team at 5 Lives are working within a genre that traditionally requires significant screen resources in terms of icons and information panels. "A second issue [we have] is keyboard shortcuts," adds Diskett. "You can't see the keyboard anymore, which is fine once you're an expert, but when you are learning new shortcuts that aren't familiar it can be awkward. Head tracking is another problem, where it works naturally in FPSs and over-the-shoulder third person games, it's not clear what the right thing to do is for an RTS, bringing lots more world into view can slow the game down which results in tracking lag."

In spite of the myriad issues, the team is keen to put their dev kits to good use and implement VR support before release. If a top-down strategy game like *Satellite Reign* can be made as spatially immersive as first-person games in VR already are, Sony's insistence that genre is a distant second to presence can be written into law.

Some gaming genres are better suited to the VR medium beyond considerations of player view. For CCP's *Valkyrie*, the fact that gamers are seated in a cockpit really helps with orientation. "Then the fact you are in space brings even more advantages – no concept of up and down, no gravity or hard deck to worry about," says O'Brien. "We are free to populate the environment with asteroids or space debris or space stations. Plus the sci-fi theme allows us to design HUD and UI elements that feel great in VR without it seeming forced."

"Some of the best 3D experiences have been those where you've really felt like something was coming out of the screen at you," adds Tudor. "In racing games, all the data is coming straight at you from the horizon so when you see the action from the perspective of the driver's eyes, you get this incredible sense of depth – everything from the horizon, the approaching corner, the

"VR was going to stay niche as long as Oculus was the only major player. Now there is active competition, [it's] great"



## KINECTIC VOID

### What will Microsoft do?

With Kinect established as part of Xbox One, Microsoft is already close to being able to introduce VR with a necessary piece of tracking technology already in place. Whether or not it has the headgear in development is another question. At GDC, Microsoft's Phil Spencer was reported as saying that Microsoft had been "playing" with VR for some time, praising the timing of Sony's announcement. Last year the Xbox creator filed a patent for multiplayer-friendly AR glasses, since when it's acquired \$150m of AR tech from smart glasses specialist Osterhout Design Group.



Imagine *Evolve*'s monster being controlled by one player in VR, with the hunters working locally in co-op.

straight ahead, the near distant objects that are whipping by, the front of your car, the cockpit, and finally the wheel immediately in front of you. Already in previous games you've been able to move your head around the cockpit with the right analogue stick, but when you do that with a 1:1 ratio using your actual head wearing a headset it truly gives you a sense of 'being there' sat in that cockpit. Now that there's head tracking too in both the Oculus DK2 and Project Morpheus headsets you can also move around that cockpit – peering in to things for a closer look or turning around and looking out of the back window. It's great stuff, a perfect match!"

Less perfect perhaps is the VR suitability of gaming's most pervasive and popular genre, the first-person action game, for whether seated or standing, unless invested and harnessed into a VR treadmill, gamers will have to be largely immobile. Meanwhile in the game world, legs and arms might be pumping away at the periphery and the disconnect between what players are seeing and feeling will work to reduce all-important presence. Sony has suggested that developers try and match the position of the player with their avatar via the various contact points that are common between the outer reality and the virtual, insisting on gun attachments for shooters, Move-style controllers for sword-fighting games and the trackable DualShock 4 for flight games such as *Valkyrie*. Unfortunately, certain player actions like diving and sliding down a steep incline may be difficult, potentially impossible, to simulate, in which case the best option may be to use VR as the premise for the game itself, as is in the *Assassin's Creed* series. As with all games, virtual reality doesn't always have to adhere to the physical world to be immersive; there are other ways of telling stories.

In *Ether One*, according to narrative designer Ben Hill, VR parallels what the player is doing: "As a Restorer you are strapped into this large machine that allows you to experience and 'Restore' others memories, in many ways VR becoming a technological metaphor of this process. Being able to explore with VR strengthens the feelings of isolation and voyeurism that run throughout the game. The art style itself also lends to the VR





experience by providing something that isn't trying to be realistic. Exploring a hand-painted world is far more startling than exploring a realistically designed world that your brain is telling you isn't real."

With dozens of games either in open development or already available for Oculus Rift, and dozens more retro-fitted either by their developers or third-party patches, it's difficult to see there being a lack of compelling VR games at the device's launch, which is still hoped to be by the end of the year in spite of Facebook's acquisition of the company. Sony's ownership of more significant game creation resources means it is more guarded, suggesting only that Studio London is engaged in Morpheus game development, while other internal teams are merely exploring VR's potential. On the evidence of a brief conceptual glimpse of a VR-enabled



● Ex-Bullfrog Mike Diskett is hoping to make VR strategy work.

*God Of War*, that potential appears high. Of course a number of third-party developers are already working with Sony, Eidos and CCP among them, and with EA's CEO expressing curiosity in VR weeks before the revelations of GDC, the question of VR's mainstream adoption has become less about gameplay and more about whether gamers are ready to buy in to the technology when it can be easily reduced to owning a second screen coupled with Wii-style motion controls.

"VR was going to stay niche as long as [pre-Facebook] Oculus were the only major players, and there were no console VR solutions or triple-A companies involved," says David Smith. "Now that there is active competition, the companies will push each other harder than ever, which is great for both developers and players. The PlayStation 4 is very much a living room console, and they'll want to push their new hardware with high quality first-party

## PERFECTLY SUITED



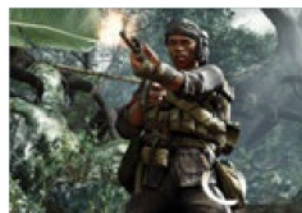
### ASSASSIN'S CREED

● The Assassin's Creed franchise is, due to the set-up of its story, as VR-ready as they come. At the centre of things of course you have the Animus, a time-travelling memory-mulching VR machine with which it's easy to draw parallels with how you interact with the game and it's characters.



### DARK SOULS

● As gimmicky as it was, swordplay in the Wii's *Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess* hinted at just how immersive motion-controlled melee combat could one day become. Fast forward a few years and with an HMD added to your arsenal, imagine how compelling a VR-enabled *Dark Souls* would be.



### CALL OF DUTY

● The *Call Of Duty* series seems to be breaking less new ground recently, but if Activision were to instigate a revolution, VR and motion controls would be the perfect vehicle. Imagine using hand gestures to direct those around you in single-player, or giving them a good shake of the fist online.



### STAR WARS: X-WING

● With both space gaming and *Star Wars* making a comeback over the next 12 months, and both well suited to VR, a new *X-Wing* seems about a natural fit for the new technology as it's possible to imagine. Whether it's likely or not is another matter, but as ever when *X-Wing* is concerned, we live in hope.

# GAMES WITHOUT FRONTIERS

THE HARDWARE MAY BE PUSHING BOUNDARIES, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE GAMES WE'LL BE PLAYING IN THE VIRTUAL FUTURE?



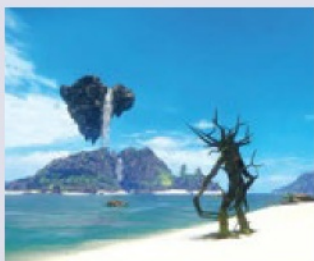
## SPACE HULK: DEATHWING

● French developer Stream On Studio – who only have one other game under its belt – won the right to work with Games Workshop's 40K licence, focusing on putting the player in the shoes of a Dark Angels Terminator, exploring the claustrophobic corridors of sprawling space structures made out of collected debris from a first-person perspective – something that will work well with the fine detail that makes up the Warhammer universe



## ZELDA VR

● Ambitious and offbeat, the *Zelda VR* project aims to take the original, top-down NES version of *Zelda*, and reimagine it for virtual reality headsets. There's an early build available to download now (via [VirtualReality.io](http://VirtualReality.io)) and, although limited, the game sees *Zelda* transferred into a kind-of lo-fi first-person shooter. It's quite jarring, but something that's certain to evoke nostalgia in any long-time *Zelda* fan.



## WANDER

● *Wander* is a unique MMO that has a complete focus on exploration and teamwork: it's non-competitive and non-violent, the pacifist of MMOs. You play as an Ent-like tree creature, whose appearance will change as storms wreak havoc on the game's island setting. Think about the PS3's *Journey*, and throw a spattering of tree-creatures in, and you've got something that resembles *Wander*. It's ambitious and pretty, we just wonder if it'll work.



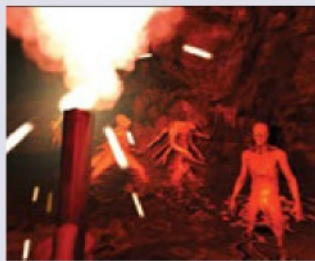
## ROUTINE

● Powered by the ever-impressive Unreal Engine, *Routine* is a horror game that takes its cues from the likes of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* and *Outlast* – a tightly woven, cerebral experience that will be even more intrusive and horrific within the intimate depths of the Oculus Rift. Set on the moon and with a permadeath mechanic in place, *Routine* promises to offer a true, unsettling horror experience.



## COUCH KNIGHTS

● Another game built on the Unreal Engine 4, and developed by esteemed studio Epic Games, *Couch Knights* is a curious title that's set in a sunny apartment that's realistically decked out, with two pint-sized knights occupying the central coffee table. Realistic avatars based on the players will control the knights, and Epic has apparently built the game to show off how positional tracking can work with multiple VR players in a shared space.



## THE FOREST

● Developed by Endnight Games, *The Forest* tasks players with building a settlement amid the eponymous forest, and hunting down animals to supply themselves with food during the day whilst fighting off weird, humanoid monstrosities at night. It all seems very *Blair Witch Project* and looks set to bring *DayZ* style mechanics to the survival horror genre.



## LOADING HUMAN

● Marketed with the ambitious tagline: 'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind meets *Tale Of Monkey Island*', *Loading Human* is a game that features interactive puzzles that require interaction with both hands to solve. The story sees you heading into your own memories to reconstruct your thoughts, which have been ravaged by Alzheimer's – we're keen on tracking the game's progress as it moves forward.



## DOOM 4

● Currently stylized as '*DOOM*', the long-awaited sequel is heading into beta this year, with access codes shipping in the upcoming *Wolfenstein: The New Order*. *Doom 4* will use the same tech as the *Doom 3: BFG Edition* that John Carmack released a few years back, but seeing as the game was trapped in development hell for an unhealthy whack of time, we wonder if VR really should have been the priority with the title...





● Project Morpheus was quickly overshadowed by Facebook.

titles, so there should be plenty of support for it in the future." But Tudor fears that those buying into VR might experience the same dilemma as when they considered buying a 3D TV. "I think the two biggest hurdles are the potential motion sickness some people, including myself, still experience and the way that using a VR headset becomes a solitary experience excluding those around you. Because it's so immersive when wearing the headset, does it shut me off from those around me in an anti-social way?"

**"When hope and finance was placed into a heavily gaming focused VR product, I can understand why gamers are upset"**

Sony clearly doesn't think so. "Games will be just one type of content," said Anton Mikhailov at GDC. "In the VR scenario emotion is amplified beyond anything you've seen in traditional games and that makes the experience very social. This experience will be for everyone." "I think developers and manufacturers are clear on VR goals but are still finding their feet," says Hill. "Until we are grounded it is going to be tough for large scale consumer adoption to occur. With that said it would be very interesting to see how it progresses with the recent Facebook acquisition of Oculus especially in regards to social media. Are we going to see a virtual Facebook as a world to explore?"

Sony's GDC unveiling of Project Morpheus and Oculus Rift's DK2 announcement were both carefully timed and therefore expected – proverbial 'worst kept secrets' almost on a par with recent announcements for *Arkham Knight* and *Assassin's Creed: Unity*. Facebook's subsequent acquisition of Oculus VR however was a rare and genuine shock. We might have expected Microsoft to make a move for the VR pioneer in order to deny the PC and catch up on a dominant Sony, as it once did by acquiring Bungie, but the lock, stock interest of the social media giant was a bolt from the blue and the takeover



● You can play *Fallout 3* in VR already. Unofficial *Minecraft* also.



● Space combat shooters like *Elite* are perfect VR material.



● Hope remains high that the Oculus Rift will launch this year.

competed so quickly that even the Oculus hierarchy were left dizzy. John Carmack, having only just settled in to his role as CTO having left id Software in 2013, replied to blog post saying that he "spent an afternoon talking technology with Mark Zuckerberg, and the next week I find out that he bought Oculus."

Given Facebook's proclivity for absorbing its acquisitions and turning them towards its relentless drive to connect people and capitalise on the data that results, gamers were immediately suspicious of Facebook's intent, while some of Oculus Rift's Kickstarter backers felt betrayed that what was intended as a device by gamers for gamers seemed likely to be at best transformed into a hurried variant of Google's AR spectacles, its only nod to gameplay being augmented reality versions of *FarmVille* and *Candy Crush Saga*. It seemed for a while afterwards that apathy and suspicion had replaced interest and excitement around the device, with Mojang pulling out of plans to release a VR Edition of *Minecraft*.

"I can understand why consumers feel let down," says Ben Hill, "I'm not saying this will be negative to VR as a whole, but when hope and finance was placed into a heavily gaming focused VR product that is potentially going to focus heavily on integrating progressive social media, I can understand why gamers are upset. I feel that with the Facebook acquisition there will be some kind of change in direction, or at least in scope, for what VR can achieve. I definitely think it is too early to tell whether this is a good or bad thing, opening VR up to a wider audience holds some interesting possibility. However I think with any large corporate purchase change happens and with change fears regarding VR gaming and Oculus' initial intentions are completely founded. Is this product going to really do what consumers helped raise money in the Kickstarter for? It can be difficult to see how it will reach its potential with VR gaming when that's not its sole focus anymore."

Both the founders of Oculus and Facebook have gone on record as saying that the destination for VR and Oculus Rift remains unchanged and that developments are more likely to accelerate that divert down another path. Given how close Oculus is to reaching the Promised Land by taking the direct route, it would be unfortunate if it diverted to a new path.





## Q&A NATE MITCHELL VP OF PRODUCT AT OCULUS VR

● A year ago Nate Mitchell was in Iceland promoting VR to bewildered *Eve* fans. Things have moved on.



**The Oculus VR headset is a very intensely personal and immersive experience, whereas Facebook is massively social. It**

**seems these two experiences could be at odds?**

I don't think so. You've got *Call Of Duty*, you've got *StarCraft*, you've got *League Of Legends*, *World Of Warcraft*, these are like some of the top games in the world. Every single one is multiplayer. Why is that? Because gamers, and humanity, we

like social experiences. I think for gamers a lot of times social experiences tend to be some of the most compelling, because they're always so dynamic and unpredictable, right?

So I think with Facebook we don't see it as a divergent path. Personally we think social games – and when I say social games we don't mean *Farmville* and *Candy Crush*, but we mean games that bring people together in an incredibly immersive way like a *World Of Warcraft* – will be the most compelling games in VR. I believe that, 100 per cent.



**One of the things that there are a lot of concerns about is that Facebook is buying Oculus as a bid to start competing in wearable tech and that might become divergent from the games focus.**

What we've always said is, we're going to focus on delivering the best VR platform for games. And if you do that, and you can build a platform and system that delivers for gamers, that all these other forms of entertainment and media and communication are going to branch off. Why? Because gamers are so hardcore and expect so much from the experience that if we can meet their standards then we're delivering a great product.

**Well so, just to clarify, then there aren't any plans to do another branch off Oculus that would be a Google Glass kind of device?**

There are no plans to do that at this time. Although, we have also said, if we nail VR and *really* nail VR, we'd love to explore AR. But



AR is a fundamentally different set of problems. And frankly the technology's just not quite there.

## How does the Facebook acquisition ensure the future for VR gaming in general?

So, the Facebook acquisition... means that VR is happening. What you're going to watch us do within Facebook is take everything that we've done and turbocharge it. So, more made for VR content, right, because we'll have more funding for developers. We can recruit more people, so a lot of the stuff that we haven't been able to execute on, all the secret projects, we'll be able to do now. We're going to be able to deliver a better product at a lower cost because we don't have to make money off of the headset necessarily. We're also able to do neat things like build entirely custom components, which is something that has never really been done for a VR headset outside of the military or, you know, the Fortune 500 space.

**“The Facebook acquisition means that VR is happening. What you're going to watch us do within Facebook is take everything we've done and turbocharge it”**

**There has been a strong backlash from certain developers to the Facebook acquisition. Most notably from Markus “Notch” Persson from Mojang, saying that he's cancelling a planned Oculus version of Minecraft because of Facebook's involvement. Is this something that people should be worried about?**

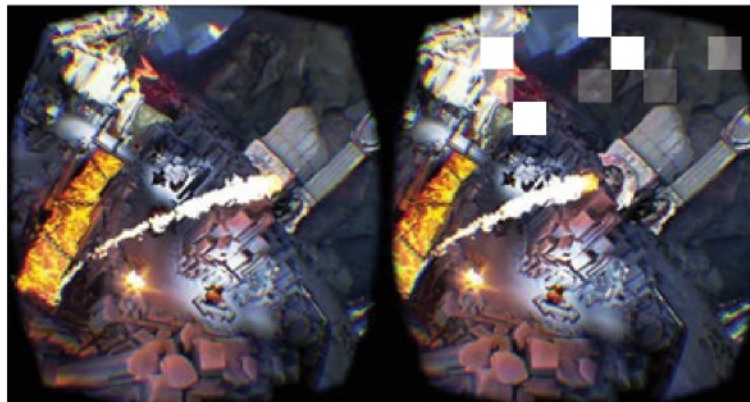
I think initially there was a lot of shock and confusion, especially from people like Notch, which was probably one of the more painful ones to read. We are trying to do what we believe is right for virtual reality and what's right for gaming. And we all believe this is the best move forward, and it does help. You know, an EA or an Activision or a Blizzard, who maybe couldn't get their head around this thing thinks ‘it's just too crazy, it's too startup-y, it's never going to work’, but they are a lot more interested today than they were before the Facebook announcement.

**Does that mean you've started talking with any of those major publishers since the Facebook announcement?**

Absolutely. We got an email from one, someone very high up at a big publisher, who said ‘Congratulations guys, it's amazing to have a new platform finally in the mix’. And this was someone who told us in a previous meeting that VR is never going to happen. [laughs] So, it really has, like if you're excited about VR gaming, this means that VR gaming is happening in a big way. And that's part of the reason we did it.

**There has also been a different backlash in regards to Kickstarter backers who feel a little betrayed that you sold to a larger company.**

You know, it's tough. When we launched the Kickstarter it was so humbling. It was just this magic experience where these people came out and really believed in us to build the Oculus Rift development kit. And we, for better or worse, really felt like we delivered, and for people to tell us to – I'm looking at the Kickstarter page now – “Go to hell.” That's hard. And I don't have an answer for that community other than to say, again, that we



● Is Mark Zuckerberg going to expand beyond VR technology? It's a strange move.



● It's odd to think that the godfather of the FPS, John Carmack, now works for Facebook.

are still building. We are still the same people. We're still the same guys and girls trying to change VR. And to just wait and see and trust us. Because we will deliver in a big way.

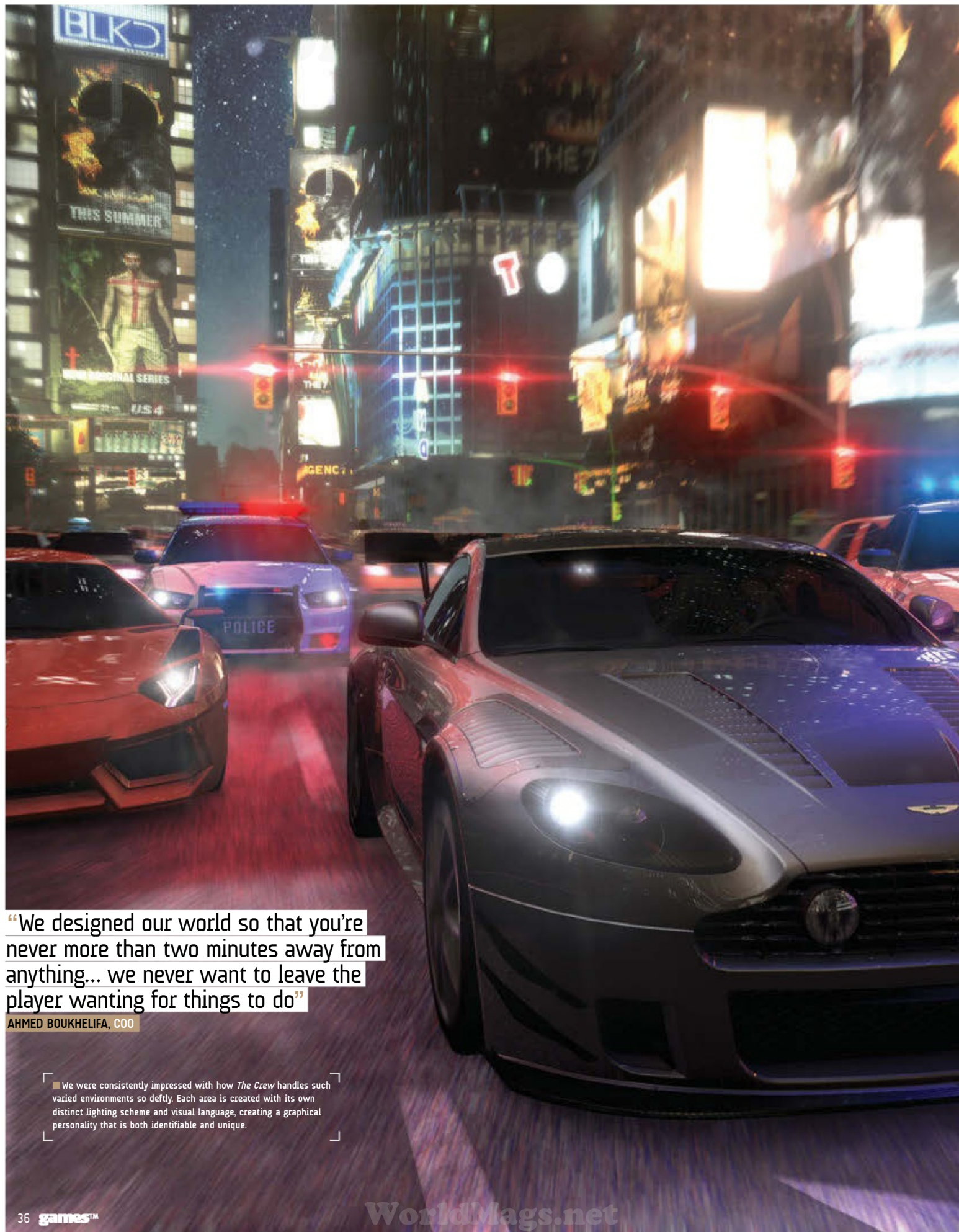
**Are you worried about Sony's Project Morpheus or should it be worried about you?**

You know, I think they're doing really interesting stuff. We had said before that if we're doing our job right, it's inevitable that a big player is going to get into the space. At the end of the day it means more resources dedicated to VR games. It means more people know about VR, more people are trying it. I think it's amazing for the VR industry. And we're excited to see what they come up with. I'm excited to try it, I've heard it's pretty good.



● With Facebook's millions, VR development will accelerate rapidly, as will publisher interest.





“We designed our world so that you’re never more than two minutes away from anything... we never want to leave the player wanting for things to do”

AHMED BOUKHELIFA, COO

■ We were consistently impressed with how *The Crew* handles such varied environments so deftly. Each area is created with its own distinct lighting scheme and visual language, creating a graphical personality that is both identifiable and unique.



# The Crew

**CONCEPT** ■ You're an up and coming racer, charged with infiltrating the 510s – a lethal street gang operating across the US – and rising through their ranks to take down the kingpins in charge of the illicit operation

**A daring new attempt to dominate the racing genre**

**“We see *The Crew* as the *Pokémon* of racing games,” says creative director Julian Gerighty as we sit down to a hands-on version of *The Crew* near developer Ivory Tower's HQ in Paris. “*The Crew* is a car game, yes, but it's also an RPG. And an MMO. And what's the most important thing in any MMO or RPG? It's your character, right? And in *The Crew*, your character is your car.” At first we were dubious – we're big fans of the RPG genre, along with all the intricacies in depth, the wealth of customisation and the consistent sense of progression it brings. But how can a car game bring those elements to life? How can a racing game tap into what makes the RPG genre so compelling?**

/// At its roots, *The Crew* operates on a ‘class’ system, like all the best RPGs out there. But gone are the mainstay conventions of ‘mage’, ‘warrior’, ‘thief’ and ‘healer’ – the classes here are variation on the base car type. Each vehicle will suit different types of terrain, different missions and – ultimately – will affect the core gameplay itself. The first and most basic ‘class’ you'll have access to is the ‘Full Stock’ car – the model you'd pick up straight from the dealer in real life. “It can be a dream car like a Lamborghini, or a little bit more like an everyday car like a Mini,” explains Gerighty. “But when it gets more interesting is when you transform that car in something else, by applying a different Spec to it. I like to think of the Specs like evolutions – like Pokémon, imagine driving your car from its level one form to its evolution; that's the kind of progression we want in this kind of thing.”

Like Pokémon (apparently), the different evolutions the car can take apply to different roles – certain types are stronger or weaker at different roles. The first upgrade, and what you'll find is the main workhorse of the game – the Spec that'll see you through the widest variety of missions; the jack-of-all-trades – is the Street Spec. “The Street Spec is all about street racing – it's all about tight corners, decent speeds, asphalt. It's the car you'll start

off with, and it's the car that'll be the most reliable on the roads for you.”

In our hands-on with the game, we noticed that the handling and mechanics of the Street Spec felt incredibly reminiscent of EA's recent *Need For Speed: Rivals* – the action-arcade mechanics and forgiving margins of error are all there, as well as the nitrous boosts and the loose reliance on the brakes. The difference between *The Crew* and the vast majority of *Need For Speed* titles though, is that *The Crew* will take you all across America: it's an Americanised America – a world map that's taken the most notable and iconic parts of the sprawling country and compressed them into a singular experience that you can drive across in 90 minutes.

America isn't a country that exists purely of roads, though – in *The Crew*, you're going to have to pursue vehicles through dirt tracks, canyons, deserts, windy bluffs. Street Spec cars will be no good here, so you'll have to rely on the off-roaders. “The Dirt Spec is inspired by rally driving,” explains Gerighty. “There's lots of drift, it works incredibly well on dirt tracks and works *reasonably* well on asphalt. This is the adaptable car – you'll be doing a lot of exploration in this.”

We played a few races (against painfully clichéd Ubisoft characters – all of the villains are textbook and the character designs look like something from a Nineties morning cartoon) that took us through the back-end of the American wilderness – most notably, through the Bayou. While the graphics may not be the best we've seen running on next-gen hardware, the presentation of the various locales was incredible: the game is fully open-world, and the 20 or so ecosystems that make up Ivory Tower's condensed America all combine to give a true sense of place as you travel around the great West. The game's Babel engine procedurally generates the environments for the art team, allowing the designers to jump into the skeleton frameworks of each area and use their development time to apply greater detail to each specific environ. The result? A legitimate

## INFORMATION

### Details

**Format:**  
PS4, Xbox One, PC  
**Origin:**  
France  
**Publisher:**  
Ubisoft  
**Developer:**  
Ivory Tower  
**Release:**  
Summer 2014  
**Genre:**  
Action-Racing  
**Players:**  
1-8

### Developer Profile

*The Crew* is Ivory Tower's first game, but the pedigree the assembled developers are bringing to the table is of incredibly high acclaim, most notably consisting of staff that worked on *Test Drive Unlimited*. Having assembled the studio in 2007, *The Crew* will be the team's first game, resulting in a six-year development cycle.

### Developer History

N/A

### High Point

*Test Drive Unlimited* was met with largely positive reviews, both commercially and critically – catering for both the car fanatic and the bike lover, the game hit upon a cross-section of audiences that other titles in the genre so often leave out. The persistent online world was innovative back when the game released in 2006, and formed the basis for the design philosophy of *The Crew*.

toy town reimagining of America that strips away the civilian aspect of the country and leaves you with nothing but the cinematic vistas that establishing America as one of the premier road maps in the world.

When you're not admiring the landscapes that Ivory Tower has built this game around, you'll be working your way through the 450+ challenges dotted around the map. "We designed our world so that you're never more than two minutes away from anything," explains Ivory Tower COO Ahmed Boukhelifa. "You can drive from Miami to the Keys in a couple of minutes, and on the way, there will be landmarks to see, skills to test and collectibles to find – we never want to leave the player wanting for things to do". As we were playing, we heard Boukhelifa and Gerighty compare the 'skill challenges' you'll find on almost every road on the map as grinding – and that really is exactly what it feels like (in the best possible way).

/// The Crew's RPG mechanics come out in the upgradable nature of your car: every race, skill and mission will offer three rewards – organised in a bronze, silver and gold hierarchy. The higher the grade you achieve, the better the part you'll win for your car. Each part comes with a numerical value that's as easy to understand as the data you'll see attached to any sword or shield in an RPG. This is a game that's as accessible to the casual racer as it is to the hardcore simulation player – the only difference is the presentation is more catered for the casual fan, unlike the hardcore racers like *Forza* or *Gran Turismo*.

This results in any player being able to assign better parts to their car on the fly, rather than having to visit tucked away parts of the UI to make minor tuning adjustments to your car. The numerical values assigned to each part ('Is this 420 bumper better than this 399 one?' is as complex as it gets) can be stored and swapped out at your leisure – think of your garage as your inventory. The only complexities for the more casual player will come in deciding how to balance your car between performance and handling, something that's made fairly clear in-game anyway, for the most part.

This defined and clear level of accessibility caters for the various other modes you'll find in the game – the fourth Spec you can equip your cars to suit is the Raid models; the pure off-rovers. If each Spec allows you to play the game a different way, then it feels

like the Raid models are Ivory Tower's love letter to Rockstar's cult classic *Smuggler's Run*. These cars allow you to speed over hills, drift over sand dunes and are also designed to take out other vehicles. The missions we played in these cars were all fairly one-dimensional – chase down another car and clip it until it breaks – but were fun nonetheless. We hope to find a little more variety in the final build, though.

The final variation on the core build is the Circuit Spec – the car that's all about performance. "This is the car for anyone that wants that true technical ride," explains Gerighty, "the handling is completely different, and it's a much more precise experience." This car – and the missions that'll come with it – will be what the hardcore racers will gravitate to. The game allows you to strip cars down to their chassis, and observe the pistons in the engines in motion. Once you get beneath the skin of the cars like this, Ivory Tower has made sure everything you see is modelled on physics – the under-the-hood movements and tunings you make aren't

**"Like Pokémon, imagine driving your car from its level one form to its evolution; that's the kind of progression we want"**

**JULIAN GERIGHTY, CREATIVE DIRECTOR**

just animations; they're tied directly into the physics engine the game is built on.

The game has been in development for roughly six years, and every month of that feels represented in-game. Both the finesse and attention to detail, as well as the genre-mixing convention-fusion the game is built around, show a lot of promise – a level of vision that's laser-focused and has clearly been the driving force behind *The Crew's* general development. We played the hands-on in a closed server with seven other players, and the asynchronous multiplayer aspects of the game all seemed to be in order, too. It functions similarly to *Need For Speed: Rival's* All-Drive feature, but with more of a focus on making you enter missions in co-op. Every type of play style is catered for, though.

We were impressed with what *Need For Speed: Rivals* could do back at the launch of the PS4 and Xbox One, but we really think that Ubisoft and Ivory Tower can take the long-form experience of a racing game and drive it to its logical conclusion... we'll just have to see if *The Crew* will perform as well as it did behind closed doors when it takes to the open road.



■ Above: The off-road sections of the game handle so differently from the tarmac-based sections, you'd be forgiven for thinking you were playing a different game entirely.



■ Right: Every facet of the American landscape is covered – you can be driving through Nebraskan-inspired cornfields to the bayous of Miami in minutes, each of them providing a different challenge for you to navigate.



■ Above: If you want to really get to the heart of this game, you'll have to head to a garage, where all the detailed fine-tuning takes place.



## TELL US A STORY

The narrative elements of the game – like all racing games – don't seem to hold much promise for us. The story is trite and vague; you travel through America, undercover, attempting to reach the top of a dodgy gang of smugglers known as the 510s. En route, you'll come across five personalities that can help you tune up your car through perks – each specialising in a different area. There's an 'edgy' kid with piercings that'll help you out with the tech tunings of your car, whilst a carefree and greasy spanner-monkey will aid you when it comes the more mechanical side. We're not expecting this narrative to be *BioShock* or anything, but we do hope it at least provides some cohesive structure for the RPG elements of the game.



■ Left: The industrial backdrops of cities like Detroit make your races feel grubbier than a Nineties grunge track, something you'll probably end up hearing in the game if Ivory Tower are keen to keep authenticity.

■ Below: For raid missions, you're going to want to beef your car up to its logical limit (and then some) to gain the advantage over your opponents and ram them off the road.



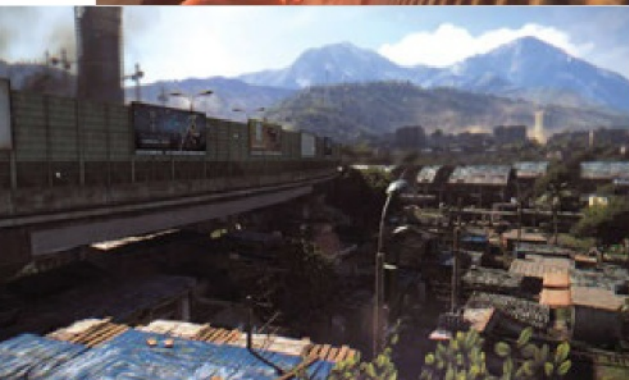
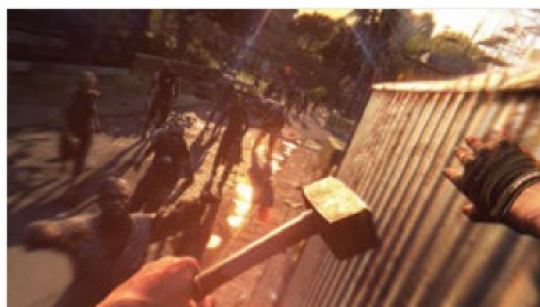
## GETTING A CREW

One of the biggest selling points of this game will be the online aspects – the very same mechanics that lead on from what *Test Drive Unlimited* was doing back in 2006. The game can have up to eight players in each other's games at any one time, and the ease with which you can invite friends to events is a huge bonus – simply tap invite, and if they tap accept in return, they'll be warped directly into the mission you're about to start. Every skill challenge and event can show the ghosts of your friends, too – if you're struggling to get gold on a mission, simply follow in the footsteps of someone that's done it before you





■ Above: One of the most interesting features is Be The Zombie mode. Much like *Dark Souls*' online system, players can invade another player's game as a special zombie type and try and obstruct their progress.



■ Above: *Dying Light* isn't a seamless open world, instead it's based on multi-regions with some loading between huge parts of the game world. Techland state there is around 100 side quests with around 50 hours of gameplay.

# Dying Light

**CONCEPT** ■ Another zombie apocalypse, but this first-person action title places a heavy emphasis on its dynamic day and night cycle. So, it's like *Minecraft*, just with more running.

## Day/night cycle of the living dead

**B**izarrely, for the studio best known for its work corraling shuffling reanimated corpses in the *Dead Island* series, Techland has a rapid-fire work rate. Nipping on the heels of *Dead Island* was its sequel *Riptide*, which was released around the same time as another *Call Of Jaurez* entry, which was quickly followed by the announcement of *Dying Light*. Still, there's no evidence that Techland has substituted time for quality, as Tymon Smektala, producer on *Dying Light*, discusses the studio's most ambitious and fully-realised action title to date.

### What is it about *Dying Light* that distinguishes it from other zombie games?

There are lots of things actually, but for me, personally, three of them are the most important – the unique setting, the dual nature of *Dying Light*'s gameplay, and ferociousness of our zombies. The game takes place in the city of Harran, a place that has been quarantined because of a deadly epidemic, which turns its citizens into... well, I think technically you could call them 'zombies', though we prefer to think about them as infected human beings. It's a unique setting, partly inspired by Albert Camus' *The*

*Plague* – with *Dying Light* we can get a closer look at what happens with the mentality of people trapped in the quarantine, what is their relation to the outside world, etc.

### Did Let's Play, live streaming and the popularity of Twitch influence the design of *Dying Light* at all?

Not at all, but we really want to embrace it. The 'share-this-it's-a-cool-moment-in-a-kick-ass-video-game' value of *Dying Light* came by accident – or, to be more specific, because

“Very early on we decided that we wanted to create a title based on emergent gameplay”

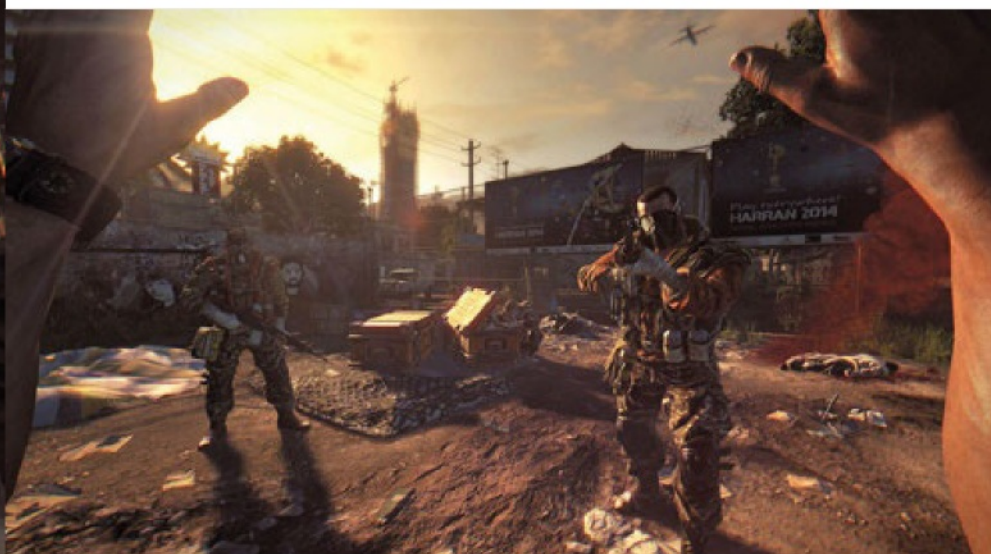
**TYMON SMEKTALA, PRODUCER**

very early on we decided that we wanted to create a title based on emergent gameplay. But because we're going to release the game at a time when the tide of Let's Plays/Twitch streams is on the rise (and I hope it'll stay that way for a long time), we'll try to support it with certain game features.

### How open is the world of *Dying Light*?

We call *Dying Light* a multi-region open world game, which means you're basically playing a





## BITTEN BY THE ZOMBIE BUG

"They're popular with us, because we're the buffs, we're the children of Romero," enthuses Tymon Smektala, producer on *Dying Light* when we ask why zombies have become catnip for videogame designers. "We love the social commentary that zombie-themed books, movies and games can bring to the table. I can't really speak for other developers, but I think their reasons are similar – zombie apocalypse is a very graphic, very extreme condition, which allows us to look at individual human beings and whole societies through very interesting lenses."

After *Dead Island* and *Dying Light*, you'd be mistaken for thinking that Smektala is done with the genre. "I think we've only scratched the surface," he says. "I hope we'll see more brave takes on it."

## INFORMATION

## Details

**Format:**  
PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One  
**Origin:**  
Poland  
**Publisher:**  
Warner Bros. Interactive  
**Developer:**  
Techland  
**Release:**  
TBC 2014  
**Genre:**  
Action-adventure  
**Players:**  
1-4

## Developer Profile

While Techland has been busy developing a multitude of varied titles for over a decade, the studio's most renowned games include *Call Of Juarez*, *Nail'd* and, its biggest success, *Dead Island*. Clearly its drive has grown with its prestige, with *Dying Light* looking like the developer's most ambitious project yet.

## Developer History

*Dead Island*  
2011 [Multi]  
*Nail'd*  
2010 [Multi]  
*Call Of Juarez*  
2006 [Multi]

## High Point

While *Chrome* and *Call Of Juarez* have both been quality action games, *Dead Island* proved the developer's ability to deliver the goods on a much larger canvas.

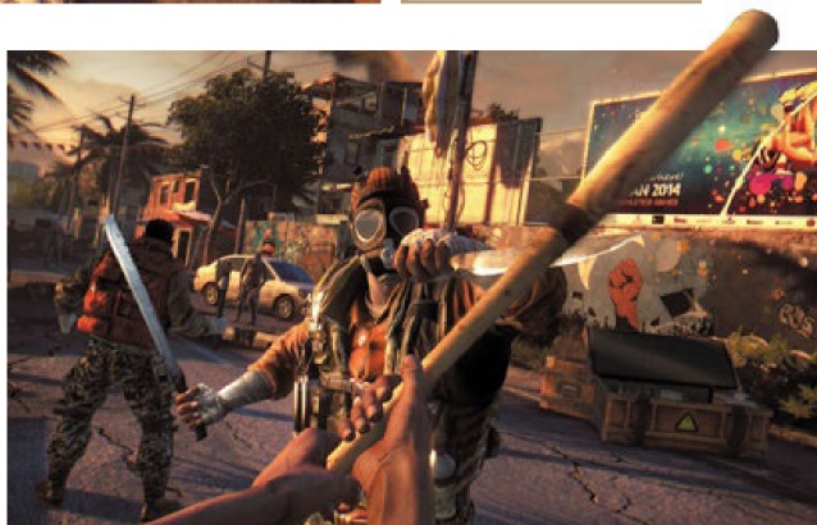
completely open sandbox game, but there are some rare loading screens between the huge parts of the game world. The driver that takes you through these locations is the main story, accompanied by around 100 side quests and a substantial number of randomly generated dynamic encounters – and all this goodness can be played solo or in four player co-op. Depending on how you approach this game, you'll be able to squeeze out more than 50 hours of gameplay. Maybe even more if you add the Be The Zombie mode, which allows you to invade other players' games as a very unique, awesome special zombie.

#### What sort of emergent narrative and gameplay opportunities will be explored with the day/night cycle?

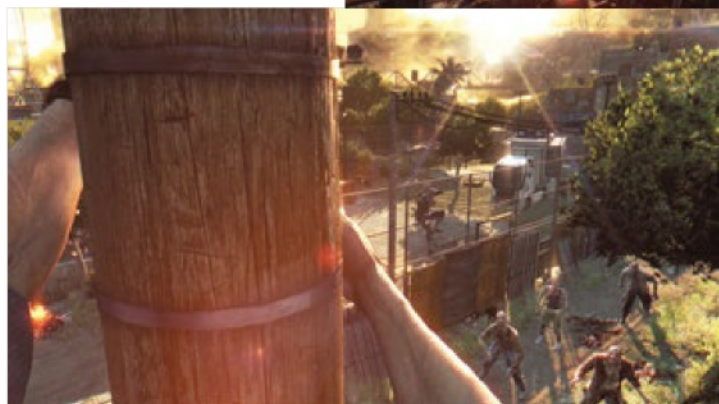
There are things that happen only during the day or solely when the night falls – there are some enemies that come out when it's dark. Some dynamic events that occur only at midday, there are weapon crafts that work best when it rains, etc. We don't want to reveal too much because we want players to experience these subconsciously, just by playing the game without thinking about all the complex systems. Our aim is to really put players in the boots of a survivor fighting for their life in a quarantined city.

#### Momentum appears to be a hugely important in *Dying Light*. What was the decision behind speed being a central gameplay mechanic?

Well, it's not really the speed but the freedom to go anywhere. We believe that we've created a game that will revolutionise the genre. After *Dying Light*, players will have a hard time going back to traditional first-person games that keep them in corridors.



■ Above: Producer Tymon Smektala assures that each grotesque mutation is "grounded in real life illnesses." Below: Players can activate traps by distracting hordes of zombies, using common objects that can be used to their advantage.





# Assassin's Creed: Unity

**CONCEPT** ■ The first next-gen exclusive iteration of *Assassin's Creed*, *Unity* sets its tale among the fusillade of bloodshed during the French Revolution.

Another day, another destiny

## INFORMATION

### Details

**Format:**  
PC, PlayStation 4,  
Xbox One  
**Origin:**  
Canada  
**Publisher:**  
Ubisoft  
**Developer:**  
In-house  
**Release:**  
Late 2014  
**Genre:**  
Action-Adventure  
**Players:**  
1

### Developer Profile

Ubisoft's foremost internal development studio has been behind the majority of the studio's biggest hits since 2009, starting with *Assassin's Creed II* and notching up an impressive portfolio that includes *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Conviction*, *Far Cry 3* and the upcoming *Watch Dogs*. It's one of the largest studios in the world.

### Developer History

*Watch Dogs*  
**2014 [Multi]**  
*Far Cry 3*  
**2012 [Multi]**  
*Just Dance 3*  
**2011 [Multi]**  
*Assassin's Creed II*  
**2009 [Multi]**

### High Point

Given the regimented approach to its output, we'd be foolish not to celebrate the leftfield *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* – a punchy, hilariously pastiche of Eighties action movie absurdity.

**T**he leaky vessel that is Ubisoft's publicity machine has once again sunk whatever element of surprise it wished to maintain with the next entry in its perennial *Assassin's Creed* franchise. After various images, character and plot details began to pop up online over the course of a few weeks, the publisher decided it was time to let the cat out of the bag (presumably the announcement was intended for after the launch of *Watch Dogs*) and announce *Assassin's Creed: Unity* – the series' first entry designed from the ground up for next-gen systems.

*Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* did much to get the series back on track after the third numerical chapter bloated its campaign with meandering plot machinations and grappled control further away from the player, and it'll be interesting to see whether the allure of a next-gen *Assassin's* will be enough to dispel the palpable franchise fatigue. At least the tiny glimpse of the world indicates a huge amount of potential, particularly in how it evokes a volatile time in French history. It might just ignite a fresh new start for the series.

## 1 A HERO IS BORN

Our first glimpse at the protagonist of *Assassin's Creed: Unity*. Ubisoft hasn't formally announced the identity of this hooded hitman, but leaked reports suggest that his name is Arno, which fittingly means "eagle-ruler". And, while we're indulging rumours, another suggests that there may be two protagonists that share the spotlight, with players switching between the two (one male, one female) *GTA V*-style. It would certainly add an interesting twist to what has turned into an increasingly staid template.

"Interestingly, it's rumoured that this isn't the only major *Assassin's Creed* game due for release this year"

1







## 2 ALL THE PRETTY THINGS

The first few shots of the trailer are pure graphics porn, demonstrating the infinitesimal detail that Ubisoft's engine is capable of conjuring. The reflections on the marble and light pouring through a Parisian mansion, banners waving in the wind and cinder twisting in the air. This is a huge visual leap for *Assassin's Creed*. Later in the trailer you can see Parisian streets with torch fires flickering and the heavy fog of gunfire demonstrating other advancements in the studio's proprietary engine. It's certainly going to be a looker.

## 3 VIVA LA FRANCE

Setting the game in the heart of France has its benefits, lending *Unity* some hugely iconic structures that players will be able to scale and will give the developer some interesting narrative opportunities. We can see that Notre Dame cathedral will play a significant role in the game. It's unclear at what point exactly during the French Revolution that *Unity* will take place, but it's safe to assume that it'll likely incorporate The Storming of the Bastille, cited as the flashpoint of the French Revolution, before moving onto some of the larger conflicts.

## 4 MOVING ON UP...

From the leaked reports, a new feature was highlighted. In some leaked screenshots you can see a couple of new button prompts labelled 'Parkour Up' and 'Parkour Down'. It's not too difficult to guess what this means and the rumour is that *Unity* will introduce a major overhaul to the navigation mechanics that have been the bedrock of the parkour gameplay for the entirety of the series. It'll be interesting to see whether the refined mechanics will increase fluidity, or keep the freedom away from the player.

## 5 TWO FOR ONE

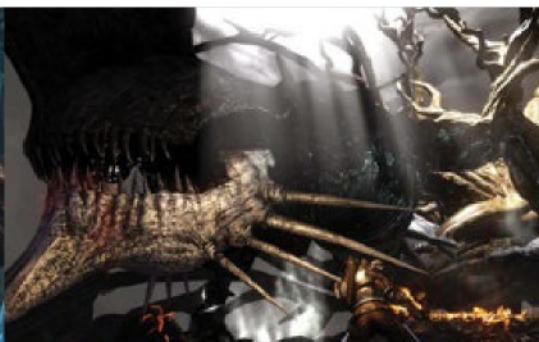
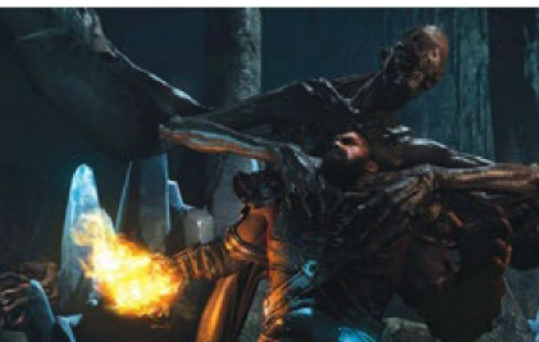
The trailer is completely comprised of alpha gameplay footage (rather than the customary announcement CG cinematic) and gives an idea of how players will be navigating through Paris. Rooftops with jutting wooden structures across stacked buildings tightly packed together across the city. It looks like a return to the series' roots. Interestingly, it's rumoured that this isn't the only major *Assassin's Creed* game due for release this year. Ubisoft is apparently developing a PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 sequel under the codename Comet, due for release at the same time.







■ *Bound By Flame* features some of the largest boss monsters we've seen in a long time.



## MATERIAL WEALTH

RATHER THAN HAVE you rely on picking up better equipment by searching bodies and chests, *Bound By Flame* features a fairly intricate crafting system. There's no having to mine rocks or anything like that, but enemies will drop the raw materials (metals, gems, precious bodily fluids) needed to mix potions and forge various upgrades that can be applied to weapons and armour. Crafting even has its own skill tree, and later on when you've got the most from a sword that has served you well, you will be able to break it down and use its loyal bits to construct new items.

■ Above: The fire magic that you have available will apparently come at the cost of your own humanity via a morality mechanic. Right: Vulcan's inner demon is starting to show. We wonder if his friends have noticed.





# Bound By Flame

**CONCEPT** ■ Gruff fantasy RPG starring a troubled mercenary with the ultimate internal demon to contend with, plus quite a few skeletons in and out of the closet to defeat along the way

## Heating away at your soul

**L**et's not beat about the fiery bush, *Bound By Flame* has more than the charred whiff of the original *Witcher* about it. With its wayward hero caught between his own inner turmoil and a dark fantasy world raging all about him, we're reminded of how sceptical we were of CD Projekt's debut, before being won over by its strong characters, tight story and layered combat. With the concluding part of Geralt's adventure delayed until 2015, *Bound By Flame* might provide for an entertaining diversion during what now looks to be a bleak *Witcher*-less end to the year.

Unlike Geralt of Rivia, *Bound By Flame's* mercenary protagonist Vulcan will be the product of character creation, with a decent range of pre-game customisation options and three skill trees to progress through: Fighter, Ranger and Pyromancer. That last one is a key concept of the game, for underneath your armour you are possessed of a demon that likes nothing better than to apply extreme heat to every situation. Stick to your traditional arsenal of swords and crossbow and you can partly suppress your burning urges. Rely too much on your internal combustion engine and the demon inside will start to manifest itself on your outward appearance and your interactions with the world will change. If that all seems a bit too *Fable*, we're told the transformation is less about good vs evil and ultimately about saving the day by avoiding or ignoring collateral damage. The demon is on your side; the question is whether you'll be on his.

Without a sprawling fantasy world to explore, *Bound By Flame* will instead offer a more linear system of quest hubs, with a progression of chapters within which missions can be attempted. Along the way we can expect to hook up with a cast of supporting characters, some more likely than others to stay by your side should you follow a career in the combustible arts. For example, there is a young mage, a burly warrior and a shadowy ranger, plus a witch and an undead fighter, some or all of whom you could end up confronting or siding with later on in the game.

Inspired by *Dark Souls* and the vogue for bastard-hard fantasy action, developer Spiders insists that *Bound By Flame's* various enemies will offer a suitably diverse challenge, each with their own range of attacks. The heft of your weapon will be the primary factor in bringing them down, for while a couple of sparring daggers up the jackie might do some seriously rapid damage, they're not going to scratch some of the impressively large foes that bookend the larger encounters. So-called 'breaking attacks' will be key – using heavier weapons like axes and hammers to interrupt the combat flow of an opponent – but of course being slow themselves make you open to being interrupted in turn. With fights against multiple enemies common it's a relief to discover that Vulcan was something of an

explosives expert in his previous life (which is perhaps how he came to be possessed), so a key part of dealing with thinning out the enemy will be to set traps and launch a few crossbow bolts before drawing your sword and getting stuck in.

*Bound By Flame* isn't offering anything we haven't seen before, but having developed a strong combat system for its previous game and built a compelling fantasy scenario around it, we have to say we're optimistic about what Spiders is trying to achieve given its comparatively limited resources. Unfortunately though, while we're looking forward to the PS4 version most of all, the difference between it and PS3 and Xbox 360

**“Truckloads of big and ugly monsters, all sorts of magic, and some of the meanest, badass bosses you've ever seen”**

WALID MILED, PROJECT MANAGER, SPIDERS

versions will largely come down to the 1080p resolution, hi-res textures and touchpad integration. That said, given the size and scale of some of the boss creatures, we expect Sony's latest machine to be more than a match for whatever the designers have in mind and, should the game do well, there's the potential for an Xbox One version further down the line.

Hopefully by then Geralt will be well on the way to making his return and we'll have barely noticed the delay.



## INFORMATION

### Details

**Format:** PS4, PC, PS3, X360  
**Origin:** France  
**Publisher:** Focus Home Interactive  
**Developer:** Spiders  
**Release:** May 2014  
**Genre:** RPG  
**Players:** 1

### Developer Profile

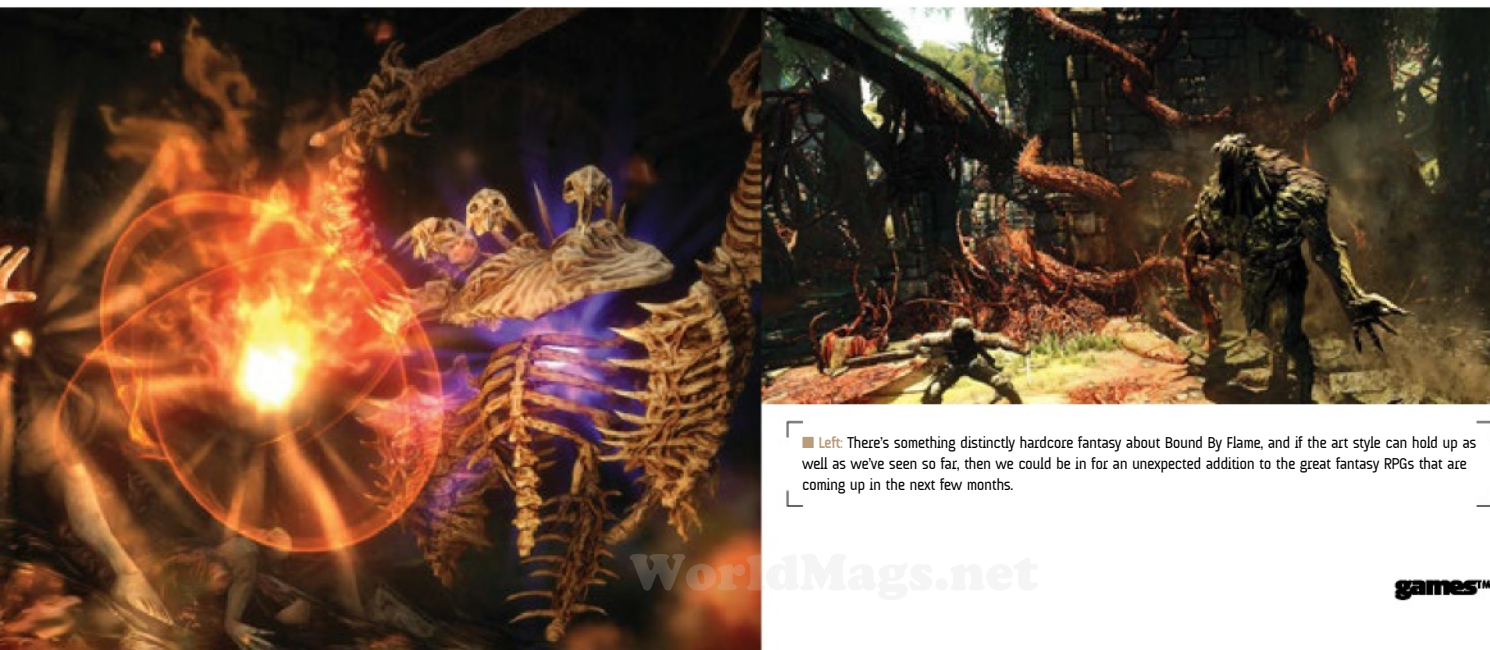
Spiders was formed from Monte Cristo in 2008. While Monte Cristo would go on to produce a number of tycoon-themed games, culminating in *Cities XL*, Spiders worked on its Silk Engine, which has been used in all its games to date.

### Developer History

Mars: War Logs  
**PC, X360, PS3 [2013]**  
 Gray Matter  
**X360 [2011]**  
 Faery: Legends Of Avalon  
**X360, PS3, PC [2010]**

### High Point

Mars: War Logs was a flawed sci-fi adventure notable for its combat system. Spiders appears to have taken the foundations of that game and built upon it for *Bound By Flame*.



■ Left: There's something distinctly hardcore fantasy about *Bound By Flame*, and if the art style can hold up as well as we've seen so far, then we could be in for an unexpected addition to the great fantasy RPGs that are coming up in the next few months.





■ Above: In this new version of *Oddyssey*, Abe is able to convince a whole troupe of his Mudokon comrades to follow him, rather than have to lead them to safety one at a time. Of course with great power comes great responsibility - you wouldn't want a bloodbath on your hands.

## INFORMATION

### Details

**Format:**  
PS4, PS3, Vita, PC, Wii U  
**Origin:**  
US/UK  
**Publisher:**  
Oddworld Inhabitants  
**Developer:**  
Just Add Water  
**Release:**  
Q2 2014  
**Genre:**  
Platform adventure  
**Players:**  
1

### Developer Profile

Just Add Water's CEO Stewart Gilray is a veteran of UK development, having started out with Bullfrog's *Powermonger* before moving on to work on Digital Illusions' Pinball series.

### Developer History

Oddworld: New 'N' Tasty  
**PS4, PS3, Vita, PC, Wii U (2014)**  
Oddworld: Munch's Oddyssey HD  
**PS3 (2012)**  
Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath HD  
**PS3, Vita, PC (2011)**  
Gravity Crash  
**PS3, PSP (2009)**

### High Point

*Stranger's Wrath* was an overlooked classic, so to have the game tarted up for a new audience has been a minor highlight.

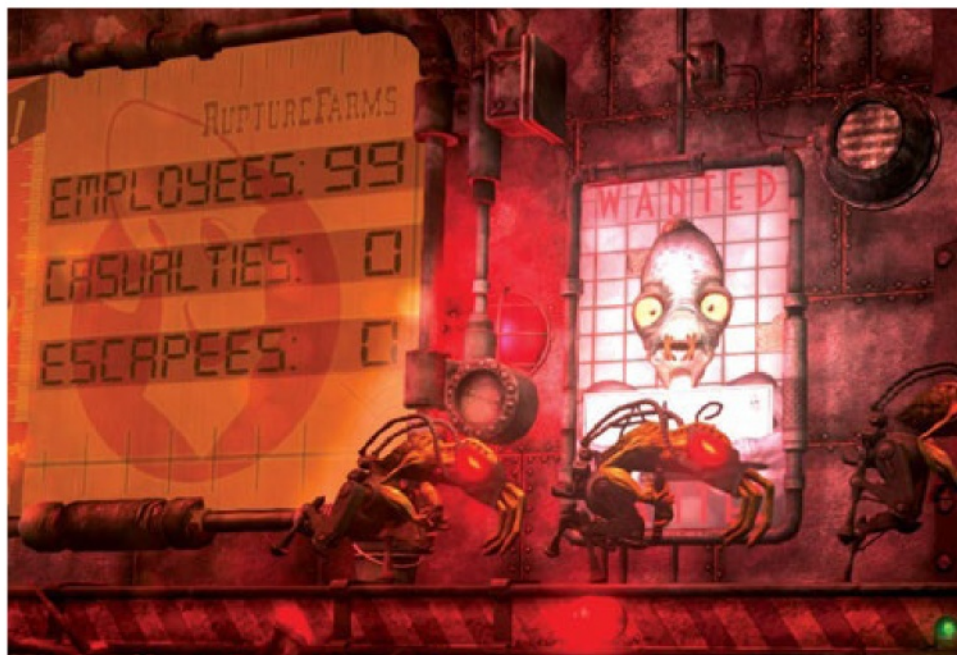
# Oddworld: New 'N' Tasty

**CONCEPT** ■ RaptureFarms' profits are down and a new recipe for success is required...

**Not entirely new, but  
potentially very delicious**

It seems a little unfair when listing PSone classics that most overlook *Abe's Oddyssey*. Sure, it didn't have the sci-fi fizz of *WipEout*, the sweeping cinematics of *Final Fantasy VII* or the obvious assets of *Tomb Raider*, but the game offered a challenge that often exceeded all three, starring a character in a world as memorable as anything else the Nineties had to offer. Were we intoxicated with reckless nostalgia we might even suggest the first *Oddworld* was a stealth classic every bit as good as *Metal Gear Solid*. Perhaps that's taking things too far, but you have to concede Abe's debut had a certain something deeply embedded beyond its platforming DNA.

With a premise that perfectly combined *Wallace & Gromit's Close Shave* with *Schindler's List*, *Oddyssey* was set across a world so dark and brutal that only brief snatches of simple humour were required to lift the leading character from his bleak existence and into our hearts forever. It was of course Abe's flatulent charms many remember most, as he





progressed from screen to screen in an effort to save his comrades from the cannibal terror of their employer. Some will forget though that the scarcity of save points contributed greatly to the frustration many suffered, yet so taut was the puzzle-platforming that 17 years on most fans would be only too happy to do it again, even if *New 'N' Tasty* were just an HD respray – which of course it isn't.

/// In close collaboration with Oddworld's Lorne Lanning, UK studio Just Add Water has taken the original 1997 game and rebuilt it using modern tools for more capable hardware. The 2.5D viewpoint remains, but instead of sprites, the characters and levels are remodelled in 3D, as are the cut-scenes. Not that the original has dated too badly given the persistent vogue for meaty pixels, but the rather more evolved graphics are certainly new and, well, tasty.

A rather trickier proposition has been how far the development team has adapted the gameplay to better suit an audience less prone to accept the practised timing of runs and leaps that the Abe of old required. Save-anywhere checkpoints are a doozy, but with a scrolling backdrop in place of the static screens of the original, there are concerns about how we might progress past waking Sligs if we can't flick back to the previous screen to have their state reset. Even more of an issue is how the original games were able to use sound cues to warn us of what might be on the next screen. Obviously if you're tearing along a scrolling level the

need to forewarn becomes less binary and more difficult to establish the right balance. As a consequence many of the enemy creatures have been adapted. Sligs, for instance, have a targeting light that casts a red vision cone ahead of them, ensuring that players are aware of when and where they might be detected. As for the waking sentries, the team has borrowed – suitably enough – from *Metal Gear Solid*, in that after a period of time guards will return to what they were doing before you interrupted them.

Whatever the rights or wrongs of bringing *Abe's Oddysee* in line with 21st Century gaming expectations, two things are clear: *Oddworld* remains a labour of love, not just for its original creator, but the renovators of Abe's new/old adventures. The amount of redevelopment that

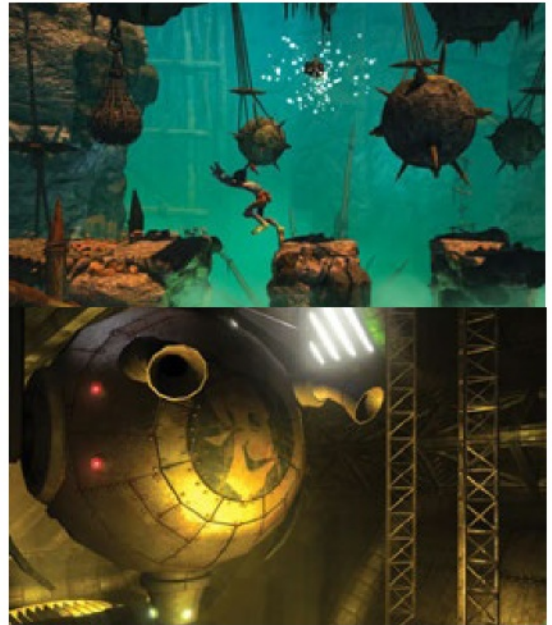
**"This really is taking the game above and beyond what we thought would be possible"**

STEWART GILRAY, CEO JUST ADD WATER

has gone into *New 'N' Tasty* is considerable, and while it might upset a few purists, most with fond memories of the PlayStation classic will be delighted. In any case the appeal of Abe's adventures wasn't their difficulty, or their 2D sensibilities, but the story of a guy trying to escape a terrible situation and help a few of his fellow Mudokons along the way. The lesson of Abe's odyssey was singular and universal; that life is beautiful, in spite of one's existence being miserable and death frequent. Those happy days will soon be here again.



Below The original's large static screens have been recreated with scrolling levels, which potentially makes progression a little harder to gauge.



## PEOPLE GET READY

ODDWORLD INHABITANTS HAS always made a point that the future of the series hinges on the success of *New 'N' Tasty*. If the game manages to shift 250,000 copies, a 'new and tasty' version of *Abe's Exoddus* will go into production, while if half a million copies are sold we're told to expect a completely new game in the series, though likely something very different to the adventures of Abe, Munch or The Stranger. Of course, how long either of those games might take to cook is another matter entirely, but those sales estimates seem entirely reasonable to us.



Left: Is it us or do the slightly enhanced Sligs look a little more intimidating and less comical than they used to? One thing that hasn't changed is their eagerness to fire their weapons in the line of duty.



## INFORMATION

## Details

Format:

PC

Origin:

France

Publisher:

Focus Home Interactive

Developer:

Cyanide Studios

Release:

Q4 2014

Genre:

Fantasy Sports

Players:

1-2

## Developer

## Profile

It's probably not a good idea to dwell too much on some of the games in Cyanide's back catalogue (ahem, *Game Of Thrones*), but when it's come to off-the-wall fantasy the studio has released some decent stuff.

## Developer History

Of Orcs And Men  
Xbox 360, PS3, PC (2012)  
Game Of Thrones  
PS3, Xbox 360, PC (2012)  
Blood Bowl  
PC, Xbox 360, PSP, DS  
(2009)  
Chaos League  
PC (2004)

## High Point

In 2004 Cyanide released *Chaos League*, a game that was so similar to *Blood Bowl* that Games Workshop took the French studio to court. However, the sides soon became best buddies and have been working together ever since.



# Blood Bowl 2

**CONCEPT** ■ Fantasy teams of elves, dwarfs and other Warhammer staples face off in violent turn-based matches that resemble a cross between American football and a night out in Nottingham

## Smack my pitch up

**It takes many years for a sporting franchise to establish itself, as early adopters of the very first iteration of FIFA will attest.** Today the soccer behemoth may be one of the biggest games on the planet, but 20 years ago it was totally outclassed by the likes of *Sensi* and *Kick Off*. It was a similar story with Cyanide's original *Blood Bowl*, although instead of being trounced by the competition, it shot the ball into its own net, or rather, ran it over the wrong touchline.

Still, that was five years ago, a time in which three significant revisions of PC *Blood Bowl* have since been released, each one a gradual improvement on the last, and while the memory of the shoddy console/handheld versions hasn't quite been erased, we're

more than a little hopeful that the sequel will establish *Blood Bowl* as the premier fantasy sports game. For those who've avoided Games Workshop's miniatures boardgame, *Blood Bowl* plays out over a series of turns, with the aim to get the ball over the opponent's line by fair means or foul. You move your players in any order, but any kind of dropped ball, failed tackle or incomplete pass immediately invokes a turnover and play passes over to the other team. Essentially it's about positioning, playing to the strength of your team, and enduring lots of tense dice rolls.

■ With a new graphics engine and the game's focus on social multiplayer, it would be an excellent match for next-gen consoles.

■ Below: The original release of *Blood Bowl* featured eight playable races, whilst the most recent *Chaos Edition* has 23. We can expect *Blood Bowl 2*'s roster to be somewhere between the two.



While Cyanide's original *Blood Bowl* was marred by obvious AI and an entirely pointless (and avoidable) real-time mode, the game managed to foster a solid fan base thanks to an excellent spread of online options. Wisely, Cyanide will be focusing on features of authenticity rather than pointless augmentations and while the fundamentals of the boardgame will remain at the heart of things, the aim is to present stats in the context of a sporting game rather than dwell on the mechanics of the rulebook. It would seem that Cyanide is trying for a more accessible experience, closer in spirit to a fantasy *Madden*, but with *Blood Bowl*'s greater emphasis on bone-crushing tackles, obviously.

There hasn't been much talk about which races will make it into the game, or how much Cyanide will charge for those that come later, but with a focused solo campaign and management options that will allow players to develop stadiums, plus a more evolved multiplayer experience, there's a real possibility that Cyanide will be kicking off with a very good game rather than having to substitute one in later.



“The stadiums in *Blood Bowl 2* are scalable and can be developed to become increasingly imposing”

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## CHAIN GANG

ONE OF THE original's most-loved features – the gleefully creative ways you can chain death and destruction together – remains a key part of *Reincarnation's* gameplay. You're awarded bonus points for more 'stylish' forms of dismemberment, while power-ups play with the world in interesting ways. Peds can suddenly become helium-filled to much hilarity, or act like pinballs and go flying in all directions when hit. Weapons such as earthquake bombs cause everything in sight to collapse and combinations of these power-ups all add to the mayhem. There's even a replay editor being produced to share your homicidal tendencies with others online.

■ Above: The quintessential Carmageddon experience – cars, destruction, mayhem and body parts flying in bloody chunks through the air. But is this viable gameplay in today's landscape?



■ Above: Possibly the rarest sight in the entire game – a completed lap. There are just too many other ways to have fun.



## INFORMATION

## Details

**Format:**  
PC, PS4, Xbox One  
**Origin:**  
UK  
**Publisher:**  
Stainless Games  
**Developer:**  
In-house  
**Release:**  
TBC 2014  
**Genre:**  
Racing  
**Players:**  
1 - TBC

## Developer Profile

Stainless brought its first title, the seminal *Carmageddon* to PCs in 1997. Several years, sequels, arcade conversions, the well-received *Crystal Quest*, and a number of publisher partners later, the studio has found stability with the annual *Magic: The Gathering – Duels Of The Planeswalkers* series.

## Developer History

*Carmageddon*  
1997 [PC/PS/N64/GBC/iOS/Android]  
*Carmageddon II: Carpoolypse Now*  
1998 [PC]  
*Crystal Quest*  
2006 [360/iOS]  
*Magic: The Gathering – Duels Of The Planeswalkers*  
2009 [360/PS3/PC]

## High Point

You could argue for either the original *Carmageddon* – which redefined open-world driving games – or the *Magic: The Gathering* series, which took the popular CCG and faithfully made it digital.

# Carmageddon: Reincarnation

**CONCEPT** ■ A successful Kickstarter means that this old-school demolition derby with an added veneer of death and destruction across a series of open(ish)-worlds is heading back to our screens.

## The need for speed, blood and ultra levels of vehicle damage

**T**he announcement of a reboot for *Carmageddon* sent a tingle down the spine of a certain section of mature gamers. Those that remembered the original (less so the increasingly disappointing sequels and woeful N64 version) can't help but have felt a moment of excitement as a beloved icon of our youth returned to the original developers and made waves once more. A successful Kickstarter campaign later, we now arrive at the early alpha stage and can see whether our memories lived up to the reality.

Playing the current Early Access alpha build of *Carmageddon Reincarnation*, what's obvious is that Stainless is very firmly sticking to the original's roots. No gritty reinvention for contemporary mores at play here. It's colourful, frantic, firmly tongue-in-cheek and everything you remember from the original – from sandbox-style play areas to a very loose idea of the whole thing actually being a, you know, car race – is all present and correct.

Any pretence at this being a fair race are, of course, soon swept aside with the first pedestrian to smear your bonnet and the chances of actually making it around a single lap without being smashed wildly off course are next to zero. The AI opponents actively spend as much time hunting you and the inexplicably numerous pedestrians down as they do finding checkpoints. There's only one map available at present – a limited area, ice-covered oil rig in two configurations, and only a simple free-form game mode is active, but it's enough to get the idea. Fans would perhaps

have preferred to be racing around the more expansive-looking Bleak City map, but this is still an important stress test for Stainless. You can win by completing laps (no chance), destroying your opponents (more realistic), or having the highest 'ped' body count once everyone is dead (most likely).

/// Visually it's still a little too early in development to pass much judgement but – and this is an important point – we now live in an age of ultra-glossy looking virtual driving experiences, so whether an apparently deliberate low-key cartoonish looking approach will be the best direction to go in remains to be seen. Certainly it moves at a fair clip, but clearly there's still work being done on making each impact live up to the same kind of bone-jarring thuds and crunches that we see in serious drivers.

Plus there's the issue of blood to consider. The original was limited by the technology of the time, but even then it felt incredibly dark and brutal. The current art direction runs the risk of feeling too sanitised and 'safe' – an anathema to the very roots of the franchise as a whole. Although more blood is promised (there's talk of 'ped kebabs'), but can you go too realistic with a game so dependent on spilling the innards of the world's inhabitants just because today's technology allows it?

It's a tricky question to answer and one that Stainless has to think long and hard about. What was right in the Nineties may not play so well with today's more evolved gaming crowd.

And this is the biggest question *Reincarnation* poses – whether we as an audience have moved on. When the original burst onto our PCs back in 1997, driving games were mostly sterile, realistic simulations or cartoony, *Mario Kart*-likes. Consequently this mixture of bloodthirsty, morality-free, carnage-inducing, adrenaline motoring was exhilarating. No one had seen this brutality outside of *Quake*-style FPS titles. We felt freedom in a racing game for the first time. It was joyous.

**“Like driving through rivers of livers. It's the antidote to racing games”**

PATRICK BUCKLAND, STAINLESS GAMES

Today, the driving scene is still simulation-heavy, but it cannot be accused of being sterile. There are damage models everywhere and freedom-heavy games such as *GTA V* arguably provide enough of the old *Carmageddon* experience to satisfy most gamers. How creative, then, can different forms of bumper-to-pedestrian mutilation really get and, crucially, is there still an appetite for it? The Kickstarter campaign may have broken its target, but how much of that is nostalgia? Aptly enough, time will tell.



■ Above: Players have the option of six main vehicles, all of which will eventually be able to be fitted out with all kinds of ridiculous weapons and power-ups.



"The development of survival mode will continue. We need to polish it, make it more intuitive and easier to use"

MAREK ROSA, CEO, KEEN SOFTWARE HOUSE

# Space Engineers

**CONCEPT** ■ Take the foundations of *Minecraft*, launch them into space via one of the most advanced indie 3D engines and add the kinetic thrill of *Kerbal Space Program* to complete the deal.

## Make ships not war

**J**ust as you can't have gravity without mass, you can't have an indie hit these days without an element of building going on. The creator of *Space Engineers* knows this better than most. Its previous game, *Miner Wars 2081*, was an ambitious attempt to bring the classic anti-grav shooter *Descent* into the 21st Century, yet in spite of developing an impressive 3D engine with deformable terrain that enabled you to blast tunnels through asteroids to hide in, the team lacked the resources to give the single-player game the triple-A attention it required. Undeterred, the studio put its ambitions for the game's MMO sequel on hold, took its VRAGE tech, replaced the spaceships with spacesuits and repurposed the dev tools to allow players to create the bulk of the fun for themselves.

Six months on from Early Access release and hundreds of thousands of sales later, the

bare bones *Space Engineers* alpha offers more player-created content to toy around with than if the development team had been handed a *Call Of Duty*-sized budget.

It would be easy to call *Space Engineers* *Minecraft* in space, but doing so does both games a disservice. *Engineers* isn't nearly as refined as Mojang's blockbuster. Where *Space Engineers* offers scale and the ability to design large moveable structures very quickly, its electrical systems are simplistic and binary – not nearly as challenging or as satisfying to master as Redstone. On the other hand, you can load in ships from the Steam Workshop and crash them into one another, if only to enjoy the spectacle of hulls crumpling, nacelles breaking away and wrecked chunks of dead ship spinning in the inky black beyond.

Until recently *Space Engineers* was just a toy box, offering a solitary though expanding

creative mode. With the introduction of a survival option a game is starting to emerge from the void. Similar to the urge to gather food in *Minecraft*, in space you need to establish the means to create and store energy to keep life support systems ticking over and your ships serviced. Of course there's no first night to hurry your efforts towards, no extra terrestrials that spawn from the dark side, nor any compulsion to explore given the lack of solid terrain. Consequently, where *Minecraft* has early moments of achievement, *Space Engineers* can feel bleak and isolating. Oddly, this works to intensify rather than diminish the need to survive. If the developer can further harness those base human instincts while deepening the systems and thrill of space flight or fight, *Space Engineers* will build upon its modest success and perhaps become a mainstream phenomenon.



## INFORMATION

### Details

**Format:**  
PC

**Origin:**  
Czech Republic

**Developer:**  
Keen Software House

**Release:**  
Out now (Early Access)

**Genre:**  
Sci-fi survival/Sandbox

**Players:**  
1-16

### Developer Profile

Based in the stag party capital of Europe, Keen was established in 2010 and immediately got to work on its in-house VRAGE engine. Clearly the Czechs know a thing or two about 3D tech, given that *ArmA* dev Bohemia Interactive is just up the road.

### Developer History

Space Engineers Alpha  
PC (2013)  
Miner Wars 2081  
PC, Mac (2012)  
Miner Wars Arena  
PC, Mac (2012)

### High Point

*Miner Wars 2081* was a better game than its title alludes to. The combat was fast and the fact you could blast through anything was novel. Little wonder the engine has been upgraded for *Space Engineers*.



■ Above: There was talk of Oculus Rift support coming to *Space Engineers* but the developer is going to hold off and see how the future VR tech pans out.







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■ Above: Raids make as much use of the environment as the mobs, forcing player groups to think tactically in an ever-changing landscape. Below: Battlegrounds provide small-scale PvP team combat with Prestige (a spendable currency) at stake. Five-man teams take on each other, first at level 30, then again at level 50.



# WildStar

## CONCEPT

■ Think *World Of Warcraft* on an alien planet and covered in sci-fi trappings. Then add a wealth of new PvP features including 40-man player-built raids.

## The Last of the MMOhicans? Or the start of a new breed?

**T**here's a lot of movement in the MMO genre at present. After a several-year lull which has seen fresh ideas and engaging persistent worlds give way instead to a mass of templated retreads and hurried free-to-play conversions of failing titles, the online landscape is at last seeing big names trying new things. For some, like SOE with *EverQuest Next*, it's about rethinking the very nature of a large-scale fantasy MMO environment from the ground up. For developers like Bethesda or Rockstar, it's about retooling well-respected single-player IPs such as *The Elder Scrolls* and *GTA* into compelling multi-user experiences.

But for others, such as Carbine Studios, the goal is to take what currently works in the genre and evolve it to the ultimate endpoint. This seems to involve filling it with as many ideas as possible.

"No sane person has the time to play all this," said executive producer Jeremy Gaffney when **games™** caught him during a break at a recent press gathering in Carbine's native California. "What we're trying to do is have a mix of stuff that people want or expect, then add new stuff on top of that."

*WildStar* certainly isn't lacking for 'stuff'. The two-day event showcased pretty much

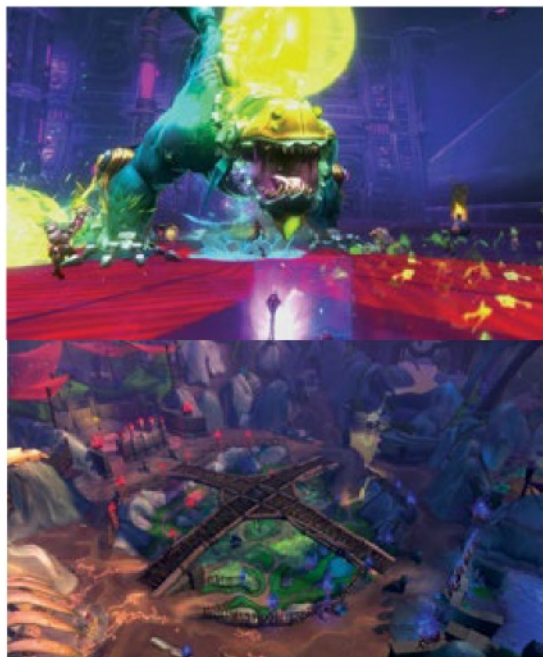
every feature the game has to offer: 40-man warplots (player-created maps), five-player dungeon zones that act as mini-raids, player housing, raids with epic-level bosses, the ever-changing adventure systems that retool existing zones into all-new experiences, crafting with tech trees, character 'Paths' that provide alternative ways to progress through the levels, and a storyline that runs throughout the entire game (even beyond the level cap) and provides specific lore-friendly classes with additional content. And we're

**"No sane person has the time to play all this"**

JEREMY GAFFNEY, CARBINE STUDIOS

just scratching at the tip of the iceberg here. We're hard pushed to remember the last time a game launched on day one with such a comprehensive amount of content.

The initial impression *WildStar* makes is of a sci-fi-esque *World Of Warcraft*. Spend ten minutes with the game, however, and you can tell there's a lot more going on. The most telling evolution on established MMO systems is with the combat. Rather than the tried and tested hotbar-clicking wars of attrition methodology that's been with MMOs since the



## STORY IS KING

Although there's clearly a lot of focus being put into the PvP aspect of *WildStar*, Carbine is very aware that not everyone that plays MMOs wants to do so with other people. Lore persists throughout the game and there's even a career path that offers more story to the players who want to find it. "The in-game lore of it is that Nexus is on the very fringes of the universe and it's a kind of rogue planet that disappeared out of space and is now freely roaming around," says Gaffney, setting the tone. "For us, it's about capturing that Wild West in space kind of vibe. At the heart of what we do is that it's a crazy frontier out there with all these people flocking to it - sort of *Firefly*-esque."





## INFORMATION

### Details

**Format:**  
PC

**Origin:**  
United States

**Publisher:**  
NCSOFT

**Developer:**  
Carbine Studios

**Release:**  
3 June

**Players:**  
Massively Multiplayer

### Developer Profile

Carbine was born in 2005 when 17 former members of the *World Of Warcraft* development team at Blizzard set off to do their own thing. Along the way they've been joined by developers from all manner of successful games (*Half-Life 2*, *EverQuest*, *StarCraft*, *Fallout*) and have grown to over 300 employees.

### Developer History

WildStar  
PC (2014)

### High Point

MMOs don't come any bigger than *World Of Warcraft*, which smashed all expectations when it launched in 2004 and pushed existing genre leader *EverQuest* firmly to the sidelines just ahead of its own major launch with *EverQuest 2*.

start, *WildStar* uses a system of 'telegraphs' – highlighted areas on the ground that inform players where their attack will hit, or where a monster's attack is about to strike them. It's then up to the player to get the hell out of the danger zone or take the damage. The system is fast, colourful, and oft times confusing when combat is taking place with multiple participants, but once you get to grips with it, you wonder how you'll ever fight an MMO monster without it.

For Gaffney, the way *WildStar's* fighting system is being received by beta testers is a cause for amusing consternation. "The number one common complaint we get with combat is that it's too easy," he says, "because you get these telegraphs on the ground that tell you to move out of the way. The second most common complaint we get is that combat's too hard because you get these telegraphs on the ground and you've got to move out of the way and dodge them all the damned time!"

Therein lies the challenge for Carbine and publisher NCSOFT in selling the game to the public. *WildStar* isn't just 'World Of Warplots'. The 40-man mixture of city building and team raiding is just one of the features that the team sees as the endpoint for where PvP has been heading in the last ten years or so – a playing style that appeals specifically to high-end PvPers and people who like chaining up raid bosses then fighting against each other.

"Equally we're not the *Path Game Of Pathy Pathness*," continues Gaffney. "We could just pick a single feature for marketing and say '*WildStar* is all about that!' but it's not. We're just trying to make a good place for people to run around. At the end of the day, we're just trying to make the most solid MMO that's come out in the last decade."

■ Above: Player mounts maintain the tongue-in-cheek flavour of the game, including everything from B7TF-style hoverboards to motorised hamster wheels. Below: Player housing lets you customise everything – including the atmosphere. Housing can also contain challenges to provide extra buffs and loot.



■ Above: Warplots are the big draw. Player-created 'bases' formed by guilds of up to 40 face off against one another in huge matches. The bases can be customised to present different challenges to invaders and can even include virtual raid bosses.



# Alien: Isolation

**CONCEPT** ■ Playing as the daughter of Ellen Ripley, you explore a derelict space station, searching for the truth behind your mother's untimely demise

## No-one can hear you scream

■ Below: The Xenomorph that stalks the station promises to be a permanent and totally unscripted threat – an enemy that's chaotic, unpredictable, and deadly.



**A**lien is a franchise akin to *Star Wars* or *Back To The Future* – there is a strong cinematic heritage, and one that has gained droves of fans around the world. Taking any of those series into the gaming stratosphere is a difficult task – where film can evoke an array of emotions through dictated and controlled shots, *mise en scene*, misdirection and other typically cinematographic tropes, videogame adaptations often fail to capture what makes their filmic counterparts unique.

/// Ridley Scott's *Alien* is considered by many to be his magnum opus, and it's reassuring to note how far The Creative

Assembly has gone to emulate the specifics of Scott's original vision in its survival-horror reboot of the franchise. "We started by consuming the original movie, picking it apart and getting really familiar with the source material," explains Jude Bond – lead artist at Creative Assembly. "We deconstructed everything we could get our hands on, from the movie itself to the archive production materials that Fox provided us with." In order to keep the authenticity of the game in keeping with the franchise as a whole, 20th Century Fox gave the studio three terabytes of data relating to Scott's original film. "Understanding how something

was created gave us the visual vocabulary to re-create it and build assets which weren't on the original set – but could have been. *Alien* is set in the far future but it's also a snapshot of the time it was created in, so in order to expand the universe whilst maintaining the spirit of the original we decided to take some interesting approaches to the design of the world."

The result is an authentic retro-styled sci-fi environment – a recreation with tightly imposed restrictions, set up by the artist team themselves. "We set ourselves the constraint of not using any additional reference material created after 1979 – in many ways we gave ourselves the

**"The player needs options to survive; the creature makes choices, so we allow the player the same freedom"**

**JUDE BOND, LEAD ARTIST, CREATIVE ASSEMBLY**

same constraints the original production crew had." This is a futuristic world awash with VHS, analogue radio signals and CRT monitors – a true vision of Seventies space fiction.

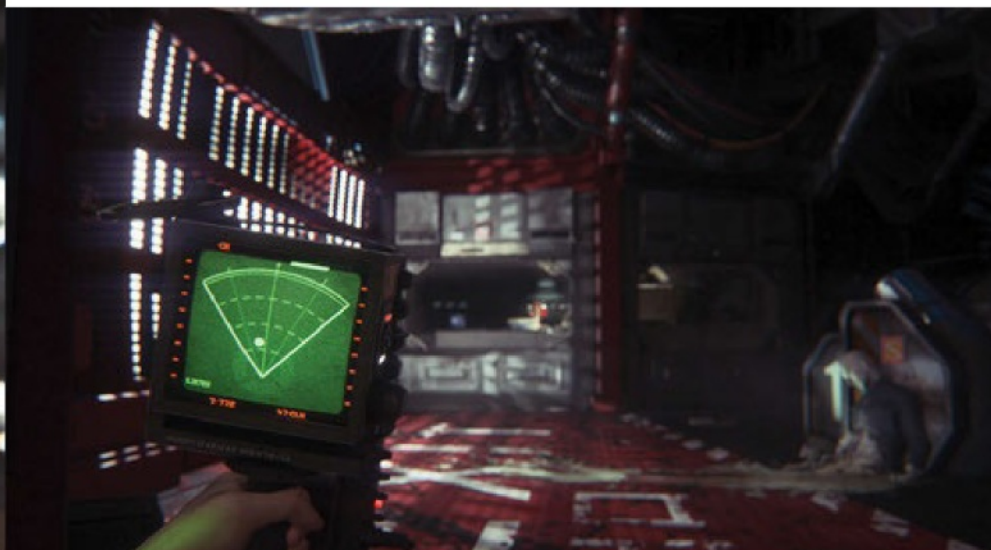
Like any survival horror game, the environment you'll be traversing is just as much of a character as any of the sentient cast in the game. Keeping a sense of cohesion to the level design of an entire playthrough usually



■ Above: The environmental design throughout the Sevastopol has been painstaking created to emulate the original feel of the *Alien* universe – something that can already be seen having the intended, unsettling effect.



Below: The old iconic motion sensor makes a return, and you'll have to keep your eyes on that and the environment if you want to avoid all the lurking threats.



## PLAGUED STATION

THE DENIZENS of the Sevastopol are a terrified bunch, but then you would be too if you had a Xenomorph running rampant in your home. "It's a very disparate cast on the station," explains Bond. "Characters from all walks of life who have either been brought together or forced apart by what's essentially a disaster. Although characters you meet all have the common goal of survival, sharing the same motivation, their response to the player and how they've reacted to the 'disaster' is pretty unpredictable. We wanted to mirror the original film's approach which has a small ensemble cast who you get to know and understand as their relationships are strained and pulled apart by the arrival of the Alien." Anticipate acts of violence and self-preservation, then.

## INFORMATION

### Details

**Format:**  
PC, Xbox One, PS4  
**Origin:**  
Britain  
**Publisher:**  
Sega  
**Developer:**  
The Creative Assembly  
**Release:**  
7 October 2014  
**Genre:**  
Survival Horror  
**Players:**  
1

### Developer Profile

Operating since 1987, The Creative Assembly has made its name in recent years as a dab hand at real-time strategy games – its most notable franchise being *Total War*. *Alien: Isolation* is a curious departure for the studio, but one we're excited about seeing come to fruition.

### Developer History

Rome: *Total War*  
2004 [PC]  
Viking: *Battle for Asgard*  
2008 [PS3, Xbox 360, PC]  
Stormrise  
2009 [PS3, Xbox 360, PC]

### High Point

Most relevant to the *Alien* game in the studio's roster is *Viking: Battle for Asgard* – a crunchy, gritty take on pillaging, slaughter and survival that for its time was fun and frenetic.

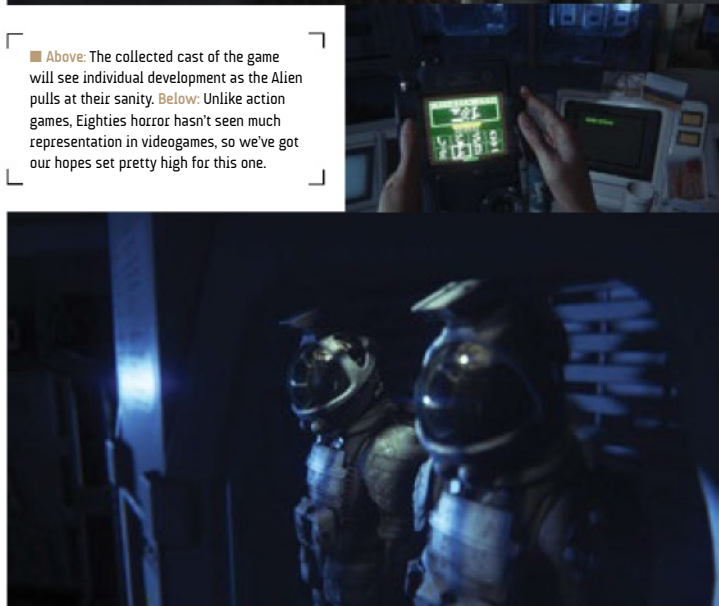
sees a studio compromise – sacrificing the integrity or atmosphere here or there in order to galvanise gameplay mechanics or plot. *Alien: Isolation* takes measures to avoid this: "Once we'd deconstructed the materials that we were working with, we broke the Nostromo down, classified the different areas of the original set – Habitation (the canteen), Technical (the bridge), Science (the medical bay) and Engineering (the bowels of the ship), identifying their visual signifiers," explains Bond. "From there we pushed each of the archetypes hard, building outwards, evolving and separating them – providing overarching themes to the spaces."

/// *Alien: Isolation* is a game that will see players fleeing from or working around one powerful, lethal alien – and the design of the Sevastopol station has been built from the ground up to accommodate this. "There are always options, that's been a key design tenet to the layout of the spaces, essentially the level design. Whether that's sneaking through the space, taking a more head-on approach, causing distractions or completely circumventing the encounter, there are always options.

This is a game about player choice – about measuring the information at hand, whether that's about the local environment, the resources at hand, the immediate threat and all the risk associated with any action. Every step needs to be considered. The player needs options in order to survive – the creature makes choices, so we allow the player the same freedom." It's clear that every step of the development process for this game has been informed by a desire to deliver a legitimate *Alien* experience; capturing that ragged fear that Ellen Ripley once suffered aboard the original ship... and we couldn't think of a better philosophy to drive the creation of a claustrophobic horror game like this.



Above: The collected cast of the game will see individual development as the Alien pulls at their sanity. Below: Unlike action games, Eighties horror hasn't seen much representation in videogames, so we've got our hopes set pretty high for this one.

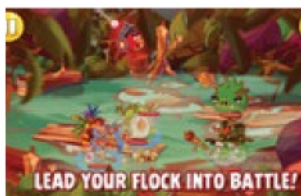


# SHOWCASE

## MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

### ANGRY BIRDS EPIC

Format: iOS, Android  
 Publisher: Rovio Entertainment  
 Developer: In-house  
 ETA: April



ROVIO HAS changed course for the next entry in its fowl-flinging franchise, as the recently announced *Angry Birds Epic* is pitched as a mobile turn-based RPG featuring the familiar cast of critters. The story involves a fantasy version of Piggy Island and it comes equipped with a weapon crafting system, armour and potions, with other items that players can find or purchase in-game. It remains to be seen whether it will be a success.

### CHAOS REBORN

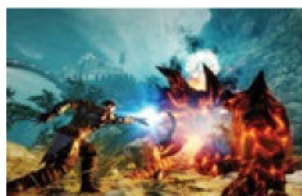
Format: PC  
 Publisher: TBA  
 Developer: In-house  
 ETA: 2015



JULIAN GOLLOP'S *Chaos Reborn* was still in the midst of a Kickstarter when last we checked, though by now we hope it's been successful. The concept is a reboot of the UFO Defense creator's ZX Spectrum game *Chaos: The Battle Of Wizards*, which was a multiplayer strategy game involving interesting deception mechanics. This turn-based strategy game will be released early 2015 if its Kickstarter is successful.

### RISEN 3: TIME LORDS

Format: Multi  
 Publisher: Deep Silver  
 Developer: Piranha Bites  
 ETA: August 2014



THERE'S NO *Doctor Who* here, instead we've got the next instalment in the series of swashbuckling RPGs from German developer Piranha Bites. The last entry took the franchise in the direction of the sea, featuring pirates and sea monsters, but the studio promises to return to the rugged charm of the first game. While development has been going for a couple of years, does *Risen* have what it takes to really stand out?

### ULTRA STREET FIGHTER IV

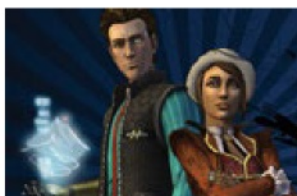
Format: Multi  
 Publisher: Capcom  
 Developer: In-house  
 ETA: June 2014



IT HAS been revealed that *Ultra Street Fighter 4*'s final addition to the roster will come in the form of Decapre – a charge-based attacker who is 90 per cent Cammy. Capcom has spent months hyping up the fifth character and for it to be a clone of a pre-existing fighter is a bit of a slap in the face. But is there more to Decapre than meets the eye? We think Decapre's moveset suggests a crossover into the 3D arena.

### TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

Format: Multi  
 Publisher: Telltale Games  
 Developer: In-house, Gearbox Software  
 ETA: Summer 2014



GEARBOX AND Telltale teamed up to unveil some more information on its upcoming collaboration, *Tales From The Borderlands*. The juiciest bit of meat was further details on the two protagonists glimpsed in the debut footage, Fiona and Rhys. The game is set on Pandora and takes the perspective of two ne'er-do-wells. The tone will be more light-hearted than recent Telltale adventures, with a healthy extra serving of action.

### CRAZY TAXI: CITY RUSH

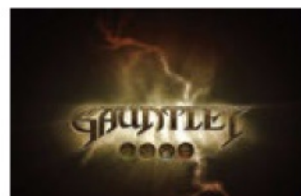
Format: iOS  
 Publisher: Sega  
 Developer: Hardlight Studios  
 ETA: 2014



SEGA HAS announced *Crazy Taxi: City Rush*, the latest entry in the franchise that adopts a free-to-play business model and will screech onto iOS and Android later in the year. Sega has roped in Kenji Kanno, the creator of the original arcade game, to return as executive producer. *City Rush* will adopt a one-touch control scheme and is shaping up to be a promising revival of the classic franchise.

### GAUNTLET

Format: PC  
 Publisher: Warner Bros. Entertainment  
 Developer: Arrowhead Game Studios  
 ETA: Summer 2014



WARNER BROS. has announced that it's set to reboot the dungeon-crawler *Gauntlet* as part of the launch of WB Games Vault – a direct-to-digital portfolio based on Midway and Warner Bros. franchises. *Gauntlet* comes from Arrowhead Game Studios, with refreshed aesthetics and local and online four-player gameplay. The publisher hopes to collaborate with other developers in reimagining some of its most-beloved properties.

### GREY GOO

Format: PC  
 Publisher: Grey Box  
 Developer: Petroglyph  
 ETA: Autumn 2014



PETROGLYPH, THE studio founded by former *Command & Conquer* developers has announced its latest project – *Grey Goo*. A sci-fi RTS, it features three factions – Humans, the Beta and Goo – with base building, both single-player and multiplayer modes and giant units that 'tower over the battlefield'. Other features include an AI system that adapts to your playstyle and visuals provided by VFX house Weta.





## DELAYED – DriveClub (PlayStation 4)

Discouraging reports out of Sony is that the studio has gone back to the drawing board to reconfigure Evolution Studios' PlayStation 4 exclusive, which will subsequently delay its release for quite some time.



## DELAYED – Deep Down (PlayStation 4)

Capcom's not-*Dragon's Dogma* sequel *Deep Down* has been pushed back in Japan. It was originally set to enter beta around the release of the PS4 in Japan and now it's confirmed that it won't be arriving until after Q2.

## METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

Format: Multi  
Publisher: Konami  
Developer: Kojima Productions  
ETA: 2015



NOW THAT *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes* has released and players have a taste of the epic scope of Hideo Kojima's continuation of the saga, attention is turning to *The Phantom Pain*. A release date tip has slipped into the rumour mill, suggesting an early 2015 debut. Whereas *Ground Zeroes* was a compact open level, the design of *The Phantom Pain* promises to take the same concept and expand it to a whole world – a tantalising prospect.

## VIKING GHOST

Format: PC  
Publisher: Dead Alien Cult  
Developer: In-house  
ETA: TBA 2014



AS UNASHAMED fans of *PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale*, it's great to see that many of the laid-off employees have landed at promising new indie start-up Dead Alien Cult. Its debut title splices together multiple genres in what the studio describes as an "arcade action-adventure dual-stick shooter-dungeon crawl-rogue-like-lite" titled *Viking Ghost*. With such pedigree and ambition, it should deliver.

## ARMADA (WORKING TITLE)

Format: TBA  
Publisher: TBA  
Developer: Pocketwatch Games  
ETA: 2015



MONACO: WHAT'S Yours *Is Mine* developer Pocketwatch Games has announced its next venture, a gamepad-designed RTS. Pocketwatch founder Andy Schatz insists that this will be the first real-time strategy game that'll do the genre right on consoles. Players will take control of a 'Champion' who is capable of building, ordering troops, scouting and fighting, while units will be autonomous. It definitely sounds like a more refined approach.

## INFINITE CRISIS

Format: PC  
Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive  
Developer: Turbine  
ETA: 2014



DC'S MULTIVERSE MOBA *Infinite Crisis*, which has the comic giant's superheroes smashed together in one universe-altering cataclysmic event, has recently entered open beta. As more players can test Turbine's super-powered smash-up, the studio has added Green Arrow, Quaman and Mecha Superman to the roster (yes, Batman is in there). The game is set for release at the tail end of the year.

## THIS WAR OF MINE

Format: PC, iOS  
Publisher: 11 Bit Studios  
Developer: In-house  
ETA: TBA 2014



POLISH INDEPENDENT OUTFIT 11 Bit Studios tells the horrific story of a besieged city, not from the perspective of a soldier, but civilians surviving on the street. Based on real atrocities, the developer describes *This War Of Mine* as "a dark survival game". During the day snipers prevent you from safely walking outside, so you're tasked with crafting, upgrading and treating the ill from the confines of your shelter, while using the night to get supplies.

## SHARDS (WORKING TITLE)

Format: PC  
Publisher: Citadel Studios  
Developer: In-house  
ETA: 2015



COMPRISED OF veterans of RPG and online gaming, new studio Citadel Studios has announced its first game, currently in development as *Shards*. The general gist is that it'll offer a sprawling interactive online world that won't require players to continually pay more money to unlock content. With modding capabilities, it enables players to create and run their own MMO, setting the rules of the game.

## TUMBLESTONE

Format: PC  
Publisher: The Quantum Astrophysicists Guild  
Developer: In-house  
ETA: TBA 2014



DEVELOPER OF indie hit *The Bridge*, The Quantum Astrophysicists Guild, has revealed its next title will be a multiplayer block-falling puzzle game. *Tumblestone* supports up to four players and involves shooting blocks of corresponding colour before they pile up at the bottom of the screen. With local and online multiplayer, AI-based single-player and co-op modes confirmed, it's clear that there'll be something for everyone.

## DEAD ISLAND: EPIDEMIC


Format: PC  
Publisher: Deep Silver  
Developer: Sucker Studios  
ETA: 2015



THE LATEST in an endless torrent of MOBAs adds some fresh meat to the proceedings. *Dead Island: Epidemic* offers a three-team dynamic and more open maps, which should distinguish it from the *League Of Legends* and *DOTA 2* clones that continue to emerge. The game has just entered closed beta, with the incentive that items you gain can be carried over to the final game.

## WHY I Defender

MARTIN EDMONDSON, REFLECTIONS  
INTERACTIVE FOUNDER

**66** *The most memorable and inspirational game for me is Williams' Defender for the simple reason that for me, as a 12-year-old kid at its location amongst a short line of arcade games in Whitley Bay Ice Rink, it became the videogame that really fuelled my desire to design them myself – even though in 1980 there was no obvious route into that! I'd played Asteroids that preceded it but it was Defender that really grabbed me with its perfect collision of game design, visuals and sound. Cracking pace, always on the edge, the last life, the last humanoid, mutants everywhere and no smart bombs, it left you sweaty-palmed and knackered after every game. Visually dramatic with exploding particle effects (which directly inspired some of the effects we used in my own early games like Codename Droid on the BBC Micro, and A.W.E.S.O.M.E on the Amiga) All bound together by some of the best thumping sound effects heard to this day. From the evil phasing 'snaaaaarl' sound, though the deep base 'thump-thump' of obliterated Landers, to the distorted crackle of your ship's final destruction. It had a genuinely lasting effect on me too as I have an original stand-up arcade cabinet to this day, complete with fag burns and peeling paint. Perfect. *





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**“I have an original stand-up arcade  
cabinet to this day, complete with fag  
burns and peeling paint”**

**MARTIN EDMONDSON, REFLECTIONS INTERACTIVE FOUNDER**



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# THE DARK KNIGHT RIDES

ARKHAM KNIGHT INTRODUCES A NEW VILLAIN TO THE FABLED ROGUES GALLERY, OFFERS PLAYERS THE ENTIRETY OF GOTHAM AT THEIR FINGERTIPS AND ONE HELL OF A VEHICLE TO EXPLORE IT



Taking on the mantle of the Bat is no easy task. As anyone who has ever wrestled with adapting Bob Kane's seminal creation in the past will know, it's not just about the cape and cowl. Undertaking the responsibility subscribes to a litany of expectations and requisites, from the shape of his insignia that adorns his chestplate down to the nefarious villains that he should be pitted against on the scum-ridden sidewalks of Gotham City. Yet, it seems the most successful adaptations are the ones that aren't slavish to their source material. Rocksteady's venerated take on *Batman: Arkham Asylum* expertly balanced the subtlety of taut, stealth-based structuring with a punchy and deeply gratifying combat system; a combination that dispensed with the unnecessary frills, such as Gotham itself, preposterous vehicles and cloying sidekicks.

This little-known London studio understood that Batman was more than just running around punching and kicking costumed crazies, focusing instead on evoking specific »





"THE BATMOBILE FEELS REALLY UNIQUE.  
IT DOESN'T JUST FEEL LIKE A CAR, IT  
FEELS LIKE A GENUINE CHARACTER"

DAX GINN, ROCKSTEADY



» talents among his repertoire – his detective skills and pugilistic prowess being top of the mandate – that would establish a tone for Rocksteady's interpretation that would both be assuredly distinct yet innately familiar.

But aggressive expansion has to take place and its sequel, *Arkham City*, offered a snapshot of an open-world Gotham, giving the Dark Knight room to spread his wings across the dilapidated rooftops and between wintry alleyways. The world was five times bigger but also less focused, and fans demanded more. The reality of a virtual Gotham to roam only whetted the appetite of its insatiable fanbase further. It was clear that if the studio had to take the series to its natural conclusion, it would have to buckle under the pressure of expectation. "Fans would never let us forget about it!" exclaims Rocksteady's

enthusiastic producer Dax Ginn, unveiling *Batman: Arkham Knight* for the first time to **games™**. "People have just been hammering us since *Arkham Asylum*

for the Batmobile. It's the most highly anticipated feature on every comment we get. Luckily, we really wanted to do it as well." Despite Warner Bros.' interactive division ramping up the output of the franchise over the last couple of years, even going so far to manufacture a new studio to deliver last year's *Arkham Origins* (criticised unfairly as a stopgap between Rocksteady entries, but is actually a capable and engaging *Batman* title in its own right), Rocksteady is concluding its work on the series it created with *Arkham Knight*.

"We'd always planned to do a trilogy of games, so the final piece of the puzzle for us was how do we wrap all this up as a singular complete ultimate *Batman* experience," reasons Ginn. "And when you think *Batman*, you think Batmobile. We knew that we had to do it right – the imagination of the experience of driving the Batmobile that people have is that it's fast, that it's destructive, it's kind of a tank in Gotham City. It was the one thing we hadn't done."

This isn't the first time that the Batmobile has appeared in the *Arkham* series, in fact players got a brief glimpse of Batman's slick ride during the opening of *Arkham Asylum*. The trick then for Rocksteady (and we know how it likes to play tricks) is making its presence in the sequel feel relevant to the circumstances and not shoehorned into the world to placate the mewling cries of fans. "We didn't want it to feel like, 'Here is a brand new thing that could never have existed before,'" says Ginn. "From a narrative perspective we want it to feel like Batman has always had the Batmobile, we've just unveiled it here." What quickly became apparent was that to be able to effectively implement the Batmobile, the studio (led by director Sefton Hill) would have to rethink its approach to Gotham City itself. Larger roads, taller skyscrapers and sprawling districts distinct

from one another would all serve this new way to explore the world on four wheels. Not only that, it would also deliver another oft-requested piece of lore to be fully realised: the entirety of Gotham City to explore.

"One of the reasons why we wanted to go exclusively next-gen for *Batman: Arkham Knight* is to really build out an enormous, detailed Gotham City that's fully explorable for the first time and put the Batmobile right into the middle of that," Gaz Deaves, social marketing manager at Rocksteady tells us. "That's been great fun. It's been enormous fun to drive the Batmobile around this destructible Gotham, and it's something that was really only made possible by us exclusively going next-gen." From the twinkling lights seen from the banks of *Arkham Asylum*'s compact islet, to standing above the madhouse's new locale in *Arkham City* and seeing Wayne Tower impose itself over the skyline, Rocksteady has always teased its vision of Batman's stomping ground, despite packing in the majority of its iconography into *Arkham City*'s cordoned off expanse.

What's impressive about the fully realised rendition of Gotham is just how much Rocksteady has learnt from its own mistakes. It still has the neon signs burning through the blackened sky, its gothic

## "PEOPLE HAVE JUST BEEN HAMMERING US SINCE ARKHAM ASYLUM FOR THE BATMOBILE"



■ New combat enhancements in *Arkham Knight* include fear takedowns – Batman pops out to surprise thugs, dropping the game into slow-mo.



■ Not only has Gotham been expanded but it's also destructible. Much of the scenery can be smashed through by the Batmobile, making for some impressively bombastic chases.





spires piercing through the sea of apartment blocks and walkways, gargoyles and wires acting as the connective tissue bridging each structure, but it also has much more character.

**W**e get a glimpse of Gotham's own Chinatown lit by rows of red paper lanterns, while the neighbouring industrial district imposes its murky cathedrals of commerce over the bright lights, sitting next to the rain-soaked boat docks. Beyond that there's the aforementioned Wayne Tower, the various landmarks clustered among its predecessor's region and a clock tower that houses Oracle's secret headquarters, but each slots neatly into the world around it without compromising the tone or contradicting the studio's previous designs (although, whether it matches up to WB Montreal's work on *Arkham Origins* remains to be seen). As Deaves explains, it's not just about carving a wider path for the Batmobile to roar through, but to enable players the opportunity to navigate through the world how they see fit and creating a world that gratifies from above and on a ground level. "It's about giving the player choice to grapple and glide using those great mechanics," he says. "We've sped some of those elements up. The amount of vertical space that you have to explore in Gotham is much greater now to allow much deeper dives like you saw us doing in the game. But also you can choose to ride around Gotham in the Batmobile striking fear into the hearts of the rioters on the street level, so you can use those two really important parts of Batman's »

## THE ROGUES GALLERY

The confirmed villains in *Batman: Arkham Knight*

### OSWALD COBBLEPOT

**Alias:** The Penguin



Nolan North returns as the cockney-geezer-cum-podgy-arms-dealer, it would appear that Penguin's role in *Arkham Knight* – which unites all the of rogues gallery to take down Batman once and for all – is to arm the rest of his evil squaddies with the best firearms in town. He'll also be surrounded by his usual army of goons.

### HARVEY DENT

**Alias:** Two-Face



We're not sure if Two-Face will have any other motivation outside of killing Batman, but last time we saw him he was hanging upside down and being tormented by Catwoman. Troy Baker returns to voice the role (after an admirable job of taking over from Mark Hamill as the Joker in *Arkham Origins*). We suspect he'll be a villain dispensed with fairly early.

### JONATHAN CRANE

**Alias:** Scarecrow



Almost completely absent from *Arkham City* aside from a few clues – including a boat with details of a new fear gas (*Arkham Knight*'s plot) – Scarecrow is promoted in the sequel to the main bad guy. We know that Scarecrow causes a citywide evacuation after threatening Gotham with fear toxin; we predict another drug-fuelled trip.

### DR. HARLEEN FRANCES QUINZEL

**Alias:** Harley Quinn



The character with the biggest incentive to bring down Batman, Harley Quinn has been out for revenge since Joker's demise at the end of *Arkham City*. We see that she's an essential part of the villainous team at the centre of *Arkham Knight*; her potential pregnancy seems to have been dropped.





# WHO IS THE ARKHAM KNIGHT?

JOIN **GAMESTM** AS WE SPECULATE ON THE IDENTITY OF BATMAN'S NEW FOE, THE TITULAR ARKHAM KNIGHT

## JOKER



While he died at the end of *Batman: Arkham City*, there's every chance that the Clown Prince of Crime was pulling a fast one on ol' Bats and has concocted some master plan to lure the hero into a false sense of security.

**Odds: 5/1**

## HUSH



One of the sidequests at the end of *Arkham City* ended with Tommy Elliott (aka Hush) having his face reconstructed to exactly like Bruce Wayne. It could be that Elliott has taken the idea of replicating the famous billionaire even further.

**Odds: 3/1**

## BRUCE WAYNE



Stick with us here. As we mentioned above, Elliott now has Wayne's face. It could be that Elliott has taken over his identity completely, which has left Wayne in exile, forcing him to create the *Arkham Knight* to reclaim his identity. Plausible, right?

**Odds: 70/1**

## ROBIN



This could be any of the Robins that Batman has nurtured over the years. If this proves to be the case it's likely either Jason Todd (the second Robin, killed by Joker – or perhaps brainwashed) or Damian Wayne, Bruce's son with Talia al Ghul.

**Odds: 50/1**

## AZRAEL



Another character that cropped up in a sidequest in *Arkham City*, Azrael led players on a merry little chase around Gotham, only to deliver an ominous prophecy on Batman's fate. Although, that doesn't make a huge amount of sense given the character's history in the comics.

**Odds: 100/1**

## ALFRED



Sick and tired of watching his master getting roughed up on a nightly basis, Alfred finally snaps and heads to the streets himself. Mr. Pennyworth has a bit of army training thanks to his military past and he's slender enough to fit inside the suit. Of course, it all makes sense now!

**Odds: 1000/1**

» personality to make the experience your own." There will be areas tailored for each approach, though, as we're given an example of one of the new Riddler challenges. While we all know Bruce Wayne has more cheddar than some supersize nachos, clearly Edward Nigma isn't too strapped for cash himself, having upped the ante from his previous encounter with Batman by creating a series of intricate racetracks underground. These aren't just designed to test the capabilities of the Batmobile, but the player's reflexes as well with traps, switches to pull and obstacles to avoid adding a rhythmic pace to the trial.

"In the *Arkham* series [Riddler] has always been kind of an engineer," says Deaves. "He's always been looking to create these elaborate challenges. You saw the Riddler rooms, for example, in *Arkham City* were also engineering challenges. And we really felt like this was an extension of the Riddler in this kind of mode. You saw that it's not a straightforward racetrack at all. There are puzzle elements to it, there are traps that you have to control, and those are going to evolve throughout the course of that part of the story as well."

**W**e're told that the Riddler challenges won't all revolve around the Batmobile and he's not the only villain that's troubling Bats. *Arkham Knight* takes place 12 months after the events of *Arkham City* and in the year since Gotham has returned to relative peace, while Batman wrestles with an emotional gulf he's felt in the absence of Joker. However, Batman's other enemies have seized the opportunity to unite with the singular goal of killing the Dark Knight. On Halloween night, led by Scarecrow, Two-Face, Penguin and Harley Quinn cause chaos across the city and Batman is called in to rescue Gotham from the brink of destruction.

"I think his personality has been developing throughout the trilogy, but in this game, we delve more deeply into how the decisions he has made in the course of the three games affects







■ The cinematic transition between cutscenes and action is seamless, as we see in one portion of the demo Batman meeting Jim Gordon on the GCPD rooftops.

him and affects the people that he loves,” Ginn says of Batman’s emotional arc over the three Rocksteady instalments. “We didn’t really have an opportunity in previous games to look at that in terms of the current state of his life. We obviously analysed the impact of the death of his family on him as a young man and throughout his existence, but the relationship between him and Oracle, him and Jim Gordon, Jim Gordon and Oracle, we focus on that as it’s happening and that’s something that’s really interesting. Batman has declared war on crime but the people that are close to him start to pay the price for that decision, so there’s a lot of interesting emotional angles that we haven’t covered before that come to life in *Arkham Knight*.”

And if there wasn’t enough pressure on the studio to deliver a satisfying conclusion, it has given itself the difficult task of creating an original character – the titular Arkham Knight whose identity

is a mystery (see boxout) and plays a crucial role in this final chapter.

“It came from thinking about the way that we built interactions and engagements between Batman and the other members of the rogues gallery,” explains Ginn on the character’s creation. “They all reflect some aspect of his personality. From an intellectual perspective, it’s Riddler, that’s who he engages with intellectually. When you talk about fate and destiny and that aspect of his personality, the tragedy of his childhood, Two-Face is a mirror to him in that respect. But we never really had a villain who can engage with Batman on a physical, powerful, combat level. Combat is such a significant part of the game for us, so we wanted a villain that could really challenge him very physically, so the Arkham Knight was conceived with that gameplay idea in mind.

“The first thing we did with him was to develop his role in the story,” continues Ginn. “How does he genuinely challenge Batman in

a way that he’s never been challenged before? And then we pitched all of that to DC comics and then collaborated with them on the look of him and to design his aesthetic so that it’s representative of the function and purpose that he fulfils in the game.” Ginn won’t be drawn into discussing the potential identity of this masked assailant, who we see holding a gun to Batman’s head as our hands-off demo draws to a close. Ginn’s reluctance makes sense, given how narrative twists and subversion have been cornerstones of the *Arkham* franchise to date and the speculation will likely run rampant until release.

Today, there’s only one character that the studio is willing to go into detail about and, yes, the Batmobile *is* a character. Ginn

rounds off our interview discussing the approach to the automobile’s design and the studio’s decision not to hire an expert in the racing genre, but turn to the designer responsible for establishing Batman’s physical identity in

**“WE NEVER REALLY HAD A VILLAIN WHO CAN ENGAGE WITH BATMAN ON A POWERFUL COMBAT LEVEL”**

the original *Arkham*. “We handed the task of programming the Batmobile to the guy who coded Batman,” Ginn confirms. “Which, on the one hand is really high risk, but on the other hand, it gives you a vehicle that’s full of character and really intimately linked to Batman because [he] has been responsible for creating both of these things. In hindsight, I think that was a really smart idea and it makes the Batmobile feel really unique in that respect, it doesn’t just feel like a car, it feels like a genuine character.” It’s a salient point among the bluster of the demonstration; despite its homing missiles, the burning nitrous of the car’s exhaust and all the scenery it impressively smashes through, the car, much like Batman himself, isn’t about a checklist of features. It’s about establishing a unique but reverential approach that the player can instantly recognise.

It might not be easy taking on the mantle of the Bat, but Rocksteady sure makes it look that way.



■ While *Batman: Arkham Knight* wasn’t the Justice League game rumoured to be in development, *Arkham City* DLC made several allusions to Metropolis – is Supes on the trail of Harley Quinn?



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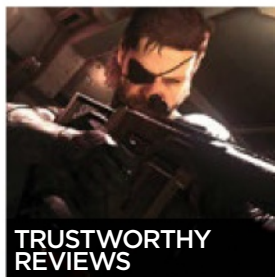
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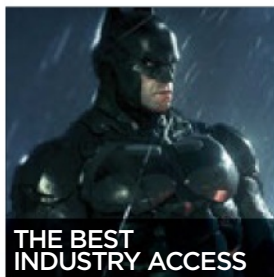
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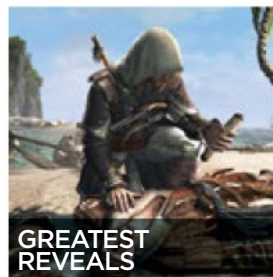
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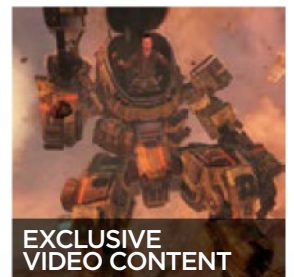
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# XBOX ONE VS PS4 ROUND 2



NOW THE DUST HAS SETTLED, THE BEANS HAVE BEEN COUNTED AND THE PEOPLE HAVE CHOSEN, IT'S TIME TO GAUGE THE AFTERMATH OF THE NEXT-GEN LAUNCH. WE DECLARED PLAYSTATION 4 AS THE WINNER OF THE FIRST ROUND, BUT AS WE APPROACH THE SIX-MONTH MARK SINCE MICROSOFT AND SONY DEBUTED THEIR RESPECTIVE HARDWARE ADVANCEMENTS, WE PUT THE TWO TITANS HEAD TO HEAD ONCE MORE AS WE RE-EXAMINE THE STATE OF PLAY



# SALES

## PS4



SONY HAS MAINTAINED a steady lead in hardware sales since launch. In its favour, the PS4 has had the advantage of a significant price difference over the Xbox One, but Sony has thumped Microsoft to date – in January alone its console outsold the Xbox One by a ratio of 2 to 1 in the US and it's only with the arrival of *Titanfall* that the margin has narrowed. Still, Sony has excused such dips in trajectory as inventory constraints due to its worldwide popularity and it's true that the PS4 is available in more territories, with a recent successful launch in Japan. The company has seen global sales soar to over 6 million, which comfortably achieves its goal of 5.3 million PS4 sales by the end of its current fiscal year. And, with the recent launch of PS4 exclusive *InFamous: Second Son*, it's looking likely that the system will receive a hearty second wind in sales, signalling that there's no sign of things slowing down for Sony's system any time soon.

■ In Europe, the PS4 is currently outselling the Xbox at an incredible seven consoles to one.



## XBOX ONE



UNSURPRISINGLY, XBOX ONE sales have seen a massive boost since the release of the much-anticipated third-party exclusive *Titanfall*. In the UK alone sales went up by 96 per cent in the week of the game's release, which was no

doubt helped by the massive marketing push for Respawn's shooter and a price cut on Microsoft's part. It suggests that the Xbox One is closing the gap on the PlayStation 4 after Sony's machine gained significant headway over the Christmas period.

Yet, the battle between the two consoles remains difficult to gauge, given the global availability of both systems. To date, the PlayStation 4 is available in over 50 territories, while the Xbox One has only been released in around 13. It's a long road for Microsoft if it expects to catch up with Sony's figures – with sales around 3.7 million – but if it continues to expand its market reach we should see a significant impact on its sales. It'll be a testing time for Xbox One post-*Titanfall*, as the gap between platform exclusives widens. Whether Microsoft's console sales can continue to accelerate is unclear, but the company's strategic investment in exclusive IP has paid off so far.

## WINNER: PLAYSTATION 4



■ It was always going to be an uphill struggle for Microsoft after such a testing festive season, but let's not forget that both PS4 and Xbox One have both been phenomenally successful. Nevertheless, Sony has come out on top, consistently topping Microsoft in sales (although it has seesawed between the two in the US) and dominating in overall global units sold. Sony has reported stock shortages since PS4 launched, which might have provoked the sudden upswing of Xbox One adopters in February, but Sony is leading the race when it comes down to sheer numbers and looks to maintain a steady lead for the foreseeable future.







XBOX ONE  
vs  
PS4  
ROUND 2

# THE SOFTWARE

## XBOX ONE



FROM THE MOMENT that Microsoft announced the Xbox One it was clear that the company was investing heavily in strong IP and exclusive content. Compared to just two exclusive boxed retail games that PS4 was boasting, Xbox One debuted with five – two of which were triple-A continuations of major franchises.

It also showed promise in its burgeoning digital library, with *Peggle 2* and *Killer Instinct* being two notable highlights that illustrated that Microsoft was committed to expanding its digital remit, despite many indie developers flocking to Sony's side due to self-publishing issues.

But where the company has really edged ahead of the competition is in lucrative deals with third-party publishers and developers to secure major platform-exclusive titles. It began with Capcom's *Dead Rising 3* (which seemed apt considering the original was an Xbox 360 exclusive) and recently continued with *Titanfall* – one of the most anticipated games of the year. The gamble seems to have paid off so far, as the release of *Titanfall* has given the Xbox One a much-needed sales boost. By matching its exclusive content with the steady trickle of third-party support, Xbox One has kept its users busy since it was launched in November.



■ Microsoft need to get its strongest IPs on the Xbox One sooner, rather than later.



## PS4



SONY'S MACHINE HAD an awkward launch after both *Watch Dogs* (which featured heavily in marketing with platform-exclusive content) and *DriveClub* missed the PS4's debut. Sony compensated by bolstering its library of downloadable and indie titles and, at least at this stage, has proven itself the superior platform when it comes to indie support. Likewise, its revised PS Plus scheme has also ensured there is a constant stream of titles made available to subscribers (which is anyone who wants to play their games online), making it a slightly more alluring package over what Xbox Live offers consumers.

Nevertheless, when it comes down to retail releases, Sony's first-party and exclusive games have yet to ignite real excitement in the next-gen capabilities of the PS4 and look lacking in comparison to Microsoft. The two biggest releases to date, *Killzone: Shadow Fall* and *InFamous: Second Son*, both proved to be magnificent technical showcases, merely suggesting the nascent potential of the system. However, despite clear improvements over previous franchise entries, both titles lacked the gameplay engagement to linger in the mind once the discs had stopped spinning. Sony's advertising slogan for its new console chimed 'Greatness Awaits', but it looks like PS4 owners will have to wait a little longer to discover that.

■ *InFamous* topped the charts on release, but is that only because of nothing else to play on PS4?



## WINNER: XBOX ONE



■ *Titanfall* alone could have secured this for Xbox One, but the fact that it has consistently proven since launch to have a wide variety of exclusive titles in multiple genres, matched with a healthy digital library and solid third-party support, gives it the clear headway over PlayStation 4. The key will be for Microsoft to continue to invest heavily in exclusive content, which could help the Xbox One pull ahead in sales in the long term. Right now, though, Xbox One's gaming catalogue boasts both quantity and quality and consumers are starting to find that hard to ignore.

# TECH COMPARISON

## PS4



BEING A FULL £100 cheaper than the Xbox One, the PS4 offers better value for money – if you look into its core components. Now the consoles are out, we've had time to tinker around with various settings and games, trying to extract the best experiences from each.

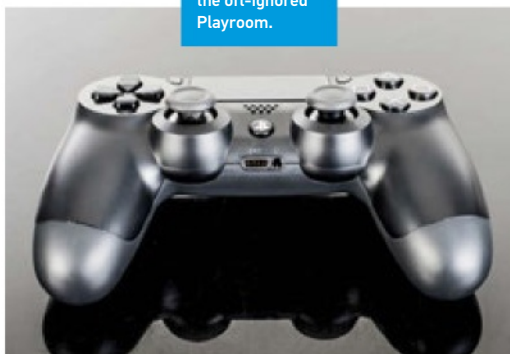
The PlayStation 4's obvious benefit so far has been its ability to run a glut of third-party titles at 1080p and 60 frames per second – something that has erupted into a selling point far more than we could have predicted. Having dropped the Cell processor that inhibited development for so long on the PS3, we're also seeing more developers move to the PS4 because of its simple and accessible infrastructure.

Then there's the Vita and the Remote Play too, which allows players to play their PS4 games through their Vita – something the Xbox gamers will unfortunately never get the chance to experience. We've found that the PlayStation Camera isn't as consistent or responsive as the Kinect, though, and the facial recognition features and voice commands rarely work as effectively as they should.

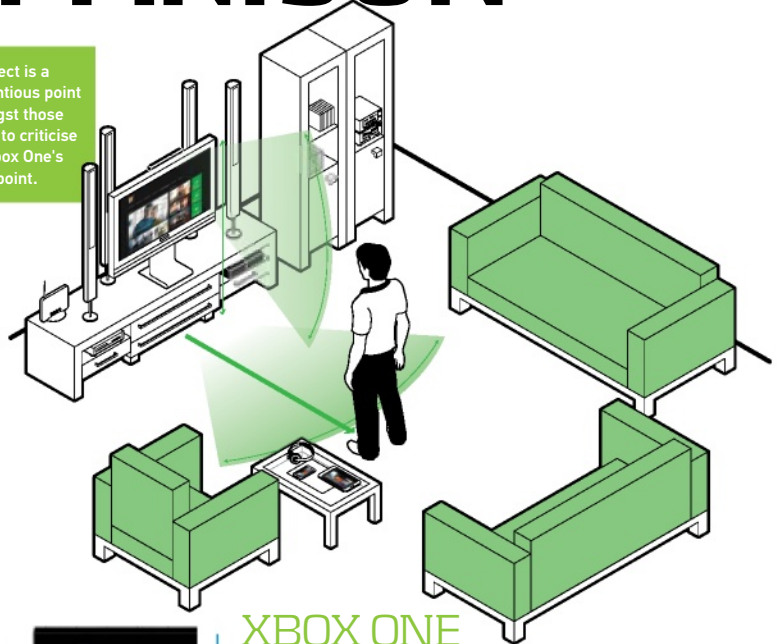
The DualShock 4 has proved its worth over the Xbox One's pad, too – the touchpad has been incorporated into third-party titles more than we thought it would, and the occasional flourishes we've seen with the light bar (*Tomb Raider* and *Thief* are the most notable examples) caught us off guard with their functionality.



■ The PS Camera has seen little practical use outside of the oft-ignored Playroom.



■ Kinect is a contentious point amongst those eager to criticise the Xbox One's price point.



## XBOX ONE



THE XBOX ONE has received a fair amount of criticism for its inferior hardware (from how it appears on paper, at least). The price of the console has continued to be a contentious point too, especially since it comes bundled with Kinect – a peripheral that many consumers didn't necessarily want in the first place.

Thing is, Kinect is actually a feat of hardware engineering – the Xbox One incarnation of the motion-tracking camera is far better than its predecessor; the motion tracking is more precise, the voice recognition is watertight (once you learn all the commands) and the implementation in first-party games continues to impress – *Dead Rising 3*'s calls for backup and shaking off zombies being highlights.

SmartGlass integration and connectivity has been surprisingly streamlined – though the second screen's place in games themselves has been lax, the intuitive way SmartGlass works with the One makes up for the clunky and unintuitive interface on the console itself.

Resolution and frame-rate issues, even with first-party titles, continue to be thorns in Microsoft's side, and the slightly lacking GDDR5 RAM in the PS4 will outperform the One's GDDR3 for the entire generation. Between lesser memory and issues with visual output, it's safe to say the Xbox One has got off to a slippery start since its launch last year.

## STEALING THE SHOW

■ Although not received particularly well by everybody, Eidos' *Thief* made sure to put the hardware-exclusive features to good use: you could use Kinect to swoop forward, you could use voice commands to distract guards, and the light bar dynamically responded to your in-game light sources.

## WINNER: PLAYSTATION 4



■ It's safe to say that the PS4, by an easy stretch, is the victor as far as the hardware is concerned. Although both consoles are fairly evenly matched – both with 8-core SMD CPUs, 8GB of memory, 500GB internal hard drives and Blu-ray optical drives – the PlayStation's architecture and accessibility just makes it easier for developers to make their games run smoother and more efficiently on Sony's console. Mark Cerny did a fantastic job when building the PS4, and Sony has certainly learnt its lessons after the PS3's disastrous first few months.



## FUTURE



■ A simple teaser trailer for *Uncharted* just isn't enough exclusive news for the PS4.

## PS4



SONY HAS A VERY strong lineup of first-party developers, quietly working away on projects yet to receive official reveals. With the likes of Naughty Dog, Quantic Dream, Housemarque, Evolution Studios and The Chinese Room working on PS4-only titles, it's safe to say Sony has got the next year or so of releases fully planned out. With PS4 triple-A games promised to drop on PS+ soon too, and the advent of PlayStation Now rich with the potential to re-validate PS2 classics, early adopters of Sony's black box won't be left wanting after this post-release drought is out of the way. In spite of that, we're still seeing consistently good quality releases on PS Plus – *Dead Nation*, *Resogun* and *Outlast* are the tip of the iceberg as far as exclusive content goes.

## HIGHLIGHT

■ Both consoles are supporting Bungie's upcoming *Destiny* – a game that promises to deliver a persistent world and seamless multiplayer with gorgeous, space-fantasy graphics and the playability and addictive gameplay of *Halo*. Think *Borderlands* meets *Halo*, with a bit of *Eve* thrown in. We're excited to see if Bungie can live up to the hype – the game is rumoured to have a lifespan of ten years, and if we see the foundations of that being established in both consoles' first year, then we'll be as excited as we were about *Halo 3*'s launch, all those years ago.

## WINNER: XBOX ONE



■ PS Plus is a huge boon to the

PlayStation 4, but Microsoft has a stronger line-up going forward. This is going on what's been announced, of course; we're fairly certain Naughty Dog has more to announce later in the year. Microsoft has the announcements made, though, and while it may still be a slow year for both consoles, 2015 is going to be an electric year for the next-generation hardware.



■ *Halo* has traditionally been a lifesaver for Microsoft – will it continue that trend this gen?

## XBOX ONE



MICROSOFT'S INSISTENCE ON making the Xbox One a multimedia device, rather than just a games console, is seeing the device push deep into non-gaming territory in the upcoming months. We're anticipating the Steven Spielberg-led TV campaign Microsoft is going to drop later this year, and we're also excited about the interactive experiment in narration that we're going to see with *Quantum Break* – the series that purports to alter its direction depending on what your in-game choices have been.

Other than that, there are a few exclusives – with very little information revealed – floating in the stratosphere: the untitled *Halo* game revealed at last year's E3 heads up the list, with Black Tusk's first *Gears Of War* coming a close second. *Project Spark* recently launched in beta, and we can expect that to perhaps be a realistic contender to *Minecraft*'s virtual-Lego throne. Along with consistent UI updates, as dictated by consumer feedback, and new apps launching all the time, expect Microsoft's newest Xbox to galvanise its position on the market more and more over the coming year.



## WINNER: PLAYSTATION 4



■ Managing to make third-party games run better, offering better value for money and consistency in service, it's safe to say the PS4 wins the second round of the next-gen war. With Sony's recent VR announcement in Project Morpheus, alongside the promising launch of PSNow and the ongoing value for money offered by PS+, the system has a much more varied and accessible games and media lineup. Microsoft – after staggering out the gate – is coming back strong, though: *Titanfall*'s release saw sales of the chunky black box rise by 96 per cent, proving that the balance between the two machines is a fickle barrier that could be brought down by one killer app on either side. The PlayStation has won, though. After the release of the consoles, the internet engaged in a feeding frenzy over resolution and framerate – a contest that the PS4 steamrollered with its superior output capabilities. That, and the early adoption of Twitch, cemented Sony's championship of next-gen's first six months, and we're keen to see what it is going to do to keep that momentum up at E3 and beyond.









# BACK ON TRACK?

It's no secret that the Wii U – despite its early lead – is trailing behind in the next-gen race. As Nintendo gears itself for Wii U's biggest year yet, *Mario Kart 8* races ahead to turn around the company's fortunes

**B**y their very nature, gamers agree on very little. Arguing over the merits of rival console hardware, spitting bile over *BioShock Infinite's* temporal tomfoolery and differing on just about every aspect of game design in just about every game ever made.

Saying that gamers are an argumentative bunch is like describing Kratos as bit miffed. It could be considered something of a triumph, then, when the medium births into existence a piece of such unequivocally unique game design that it rallies the gaming community together in mutual agreement. Such a monumental occurrence in the Nineties presented one indisputable fact that still holds true today: the Blue Shell is an utter, utter bastard.

Used to expulse the driver in first place in an explosion of fire, frustration and harrowing misery, it's become an intrinsic part of the design fabric of *Mario Kart*, which has been humbly serving some of the most gripping competitive multiplayer gaming since the series debuted in 1992. It's also part of the series' influential recipe of mascot motorists, outlandish artillery and unconventional track design that ultimately spawned a trope in the industry that is oft imitated but rarely (if ever) bettered. It'll surprise exactly no one that this blue-tinted carapace makes a return in *Mario Kart 8* – this incarnation gliding

across the ground as it did in its original appearance in *Mario Kart 64* – alongside shoulder-button drifting, cannily-carved shortcuts and every other series staple that helped the franchise shift millions of copies over the years. But at a time when Nintendo's profits are stalling and the Wii U is increasingly looking like a costly misstep, could *Mario Kart 8* be the company's own Blue Shell to help it gain distance on its rivals?

The sequel doesn't so much twist the formula on its head as it does its entire concept. After *Mario Kart 7* utilised underwater and airborne vehicles, the big shake-up in design on *8* (numerically titled so that the logo appositely creates a Möbius strip) is anti-gravity, creating sprawling tracks with intertwining pathways that split and converge in just about every imaginable direction. Nintendo is pushing the capabilities of its platform, albeit in a way that makes for a subtle shift in mechanics and tone from previous entries. Instead of just sticking to a 2D plane as the series has done before, *Mario Kart 8* embraces the whole 3D area of each courses' space – not just stereoscopic 3D – consuming the entirety of the screen. The *Mario Kart* series has always been immaculately presented, vividly evoking many of its racers' native turf across tropical dirt paths, imperial raceways and lurid fantastical courses, but this might just be the first time in the franchise's history that gamers sit up and take notice of the visuals. Imagine the scene in Christopher Nolan's *Inception*, the »



one that takes place amid about 30 minutes of numbingly relentless exposition, where Ellen Page folds a Parisian street over itself like an omelette, and then picture the same scene but directed in HD by Pixar and you'll have some notion as to the advancement in visuals that *Mario Kart 8* represents.

It also makes the difference from behind the wheel too. Aside from holes in waterfalls, the odd cave and a handful of exploitations, the vast majority of courses that have graced the series to date have been strictly linear; racers sticking close to the bumpers of each other, riding in the slipstream through narrow carriageways and firing off projectiles at those a few metres ahead. As Nintendo has seen fit to create wider courses and tracks that divert off into multifarious routes, it establishes a new perspective on the central action.

**It's the most overtly noticeable change made to the series that has often appeared fuelled by its innate degree of familiarity.**

The wider track design means that you can often find yourself straying off for long stretches without encountering other drivers, and it's difficult to appreciate the inventive layout of anti-gravity portions of the track when you're paying close attention to the race at hand. There's a lot more elements at play, making it easily the most ambitious *Mario Kart* on any platform. Alongside anti-gravity and a new scaled-up approach to course design, almost everything from previous entries return – including *Mario Kart 7*'s hang-gliding and underwater vehicle options. Nintendo isn't just pushing the concept of *Mario Kart* to its limits, but is out to prove that the Wii U – despite its detractors – can still deliver gameplay experiences that simply don't exist on any other platform.

Understandably, the company has a lot riding on *Mario Kart 8*. It's a crucial time in the Wii U's lifespan, where its retail misfortunes and lack of third-party support has left consumers wary of investment. *Mario Kart 8* comes part of a third wave of exclusive titles – alongside *Super Smash Bros.* and *Bayonetta 2* – that the company hopes will reignite interest in the floundering system. If it fails to shift units, then it could be the final nail in the coffin for the Wii U. That also leaves a lot of questions as to how it'll promote the hardware itself. The Wii U GamePad – the system's major innovation – has been utilised for the most part as a second-screen to extend features right into the palms of the player. *Mario Kart 8* does a similar trick which, aside from motion control functionality, enables you to either use the controller as the main display, a map screen, or simply as the kart's horn (which is almost impossible to use when in motion).

It's a strange omission that the GamePad's screen hasn't been implemented in two-player as a personal screen for one of the players – functioning in a similar manner to many of the mini-games featured in *Nintendoland*, which launched with the console. Director Kosuke Yabuki has previously stated that it would detract from what makes *Mario Kart*'s multiplayer such fun in the first place, but given that many gamers are struggling to understand the relevance of Wii U's hardware innovations, it seems like an oversight in terms of promoting the hardware's unique position in the marketplace. Still, it's hard to deny that Nintendo isn't adapting to current trends.

This is the first HD *Mario Kart*, running at 60fps in single and two-player multiplayer (dropping to 30fps with

three to four players) and featuring several modes that positions it as more of a serious competitor in the racing genre. For instance, the new Showreel function enables players to playback footage of each race and edit highlights for other players to watch over the Miiverse. It's something that you'd expect to find in the latest *Forza* or *Gran Turismo*, but given the jocularity and inclusiveness of the *Mario Kart* franchise – not to mention the relative success of the Miiverse platform – makes it the perfect fit for its audience.

Likewise, in another turn towards a more realistic driving simulator, there seems to be a greater emphasis on car customisation than there has been in previous instalments. Whereas in earlier *Mario Kart* games you could feel your performance differ depending on the size and weight of drivers, this doesn't appear to be the sole deciding factor in how your kart performs in *Mario Kart 8*. There's a swathe of customisable parts for each vehicle and you can see that they can impact handling, speed and acceleration among other factors.

*Mario Kart 7* introduced the idea, but its sequel appears to be making it a more prominent feature and time will tell whether it's wise for Nintendo to take the series further

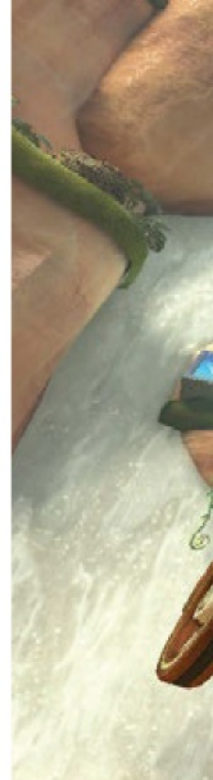
away from accessibility – after all, a vast sum of players will likely pick their kart based on aesthetics, rather than whether they'll gain a speed boost by attaching a parasol.

**That's not to say that this isn't the *Mario Kart* that you spent hours cheering, laughing and cursing at over the**

**years.** While Nintendo is clearly pushing against convention the further into the franchise it gets, *Mario Kart 8* remains unmistakable in the way that it handles. You know the drill: launch off the starting grid and drift around each corner to gain that all-important speed boost, firing off weapons to take down your opponents and, yes, even getting knocked out of first place by the notorious Blue Shell. There's something about how every



**“The company has a lot riding on Mario Kart 8. It's a crucial time in the Wii U's lifespan”**



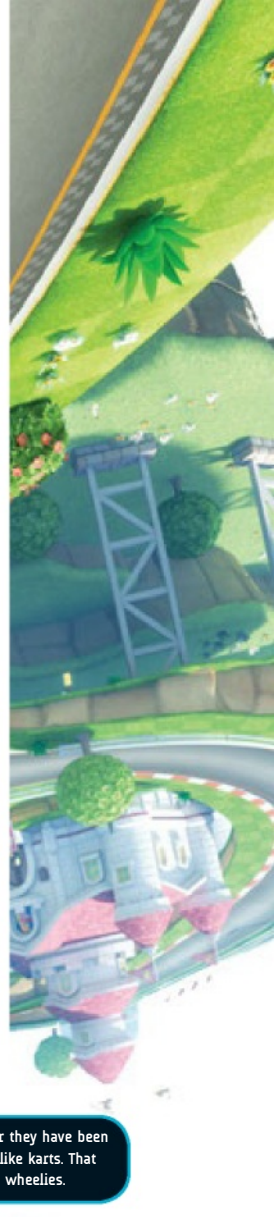




• The first *Mario Kart* in HD is certainly stunning to look at and Nintendo has made sure it presents a variety of different course designs to showcase the startling visuals.



• Bikes make a return, however they have been altered slightly to behave more like karts. That means you won't be able to pop wheelies.



## A Look At What's New In Mario Kart 8

Here are some of the new items and characters you can expect to find



### NEW ITEM: PIRANHA PLANT

One of the new weapons is the Piranha Plant. Out of a plant pot the familiar flower sprouts and any rival racer that edges too close will feel the sharp pain of its spiked maw. It entirely relies on being in very close proximity but it's effective at taking down anyone who tries to overtake.



### NEW ITEM: BOOMERANG

This does pretty much exactly what you'd expect it to. Fire this and it'll come straight back to you, and although there's no auto-aim it does travel a fair distance and bounce off surfaces making it quite effective if aimed properly. You get three shots before the item disappears from your arsenal.



### NEW CHARACTERS: KOOPALINGS

Bowser's minions make their debut in *Mario Kart 8* with Ludwig, Wendy, et al making the debut on the track. It's a bit odd having so many familiar characters populate the roster, but there's still plenty of room for a few surprises – although, don't expect the series to do a *Smash Bros*.



### NEW KART: ANTI-GRAV

The big new feature of *Mario Kart 8*, anti-grav allows Mario and chums to drive upside down, along walls and, well, any direction they ruddy well want, really. If you bump into another racer on an anti-grav portion of the track you'll be sent into a Spin Turbo and gain a momentary boost.



# Track Listing

games™ guides you through some of the new tracks featured in Mario Kart 8



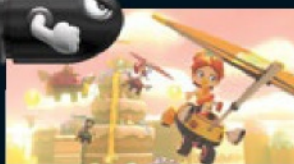
## MARIO KART STADIUM

○ This night-set motorway doozy takes the standard track template and then adds a few subtle anti-gravity turns that gently introduce the concept, signalling that this isn't the straightforward Mario Kart experience you might expect.



## WATER PARK

○ Reminiscent of Coconut Mall in Mario Kart Wii, this course goes through building interiors before diving players underwater and up through corkscrew turns in a colourful rollercoaster-themed track.



## SWEET SWEET CANYON

○ One of the visual standouts among the fresh crop of courses, Sweet Sweet Canyon looks like it has been lifted straight out of *Wreck-It-Ralph*. Charge through cakey terrain, dive through syrup rivers and emerge again atop biscuit buildings.



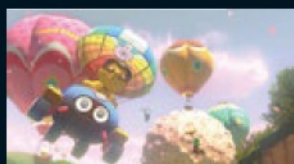
## THWOMP RUINS

○ An Aztec stage that has giant Thwomp's stomping down in certain portions of the track, this pushes players to use the walls and find other routes around the course. It has a few extended flying segments as well and helps to illustrate the visual diversity.



## MARIO CIRCUIT

○ The track that we've seen the most of to date, it's utterly gorgeous, the road twisting and lifting above the ground before wrapping itself around Peach's Castle. It's indicative of how *Mario Kart 8* is able to explore the entire 3D space, while producing the series' most arresting visuals.



## SHY GUY FALLS

○ Anti-gravity comes in handy in this fast-paced track that has players racing up and down waterfalls and hitting speed boosters to gain the advantage. There's plenty of airborne action here too, so you'll need to stock up on those Mushrooms if you want to get ahead.



○ The character animations have been vastly improved, particularly in facial mannerisms.





”aspect of the game design clicks together that still makes it the best the genre has to offer. If there's one struggle that the series has always wrestled with then it's balance. Rubber-banding has been a contentious issue from the beginning and as the arsenal of weaponry and simultaneous racers expand, so too has been the technical issue of making the game fair for all skill levels of players. During our time with *Mario Kart 8*, it was difficult to tell whether Nintendo had made the problem better or worse, with the usual woes of mediocre power-ups often rewarding those trailing in the middle, while players at the back zoom past in the race's closing moments.

Ultimately, the game plays somewhere between *Mario Kart 7* and *Mario Kart Wii*; a blend of primary enhancements from both – collecting coins across the track to increase your top

speed, with motorcycles back (albeit handling more like karts, which means wheelies have been ousted) and a max racer count of 12. The tracks, too, seem to adapt the best of both games. Karts cut through chocolate gorges and down into syrupy pits in Sweet Sweet Canyon (looking not unlike the climactic race from the movie *Wreck-It-Ralph*), launching players into the air through biscuits and other confectionary; in the impressive Toad Harbour, vehicles are launched through the wide streets and over the steep roads in a San Francisco-inspired track that offers plenty of impromptu boost opportunities and gliding sections.

There's plenty more as well, swooping players through familiar territories that include haunted houses, jungle ruins and mountainous peaks – it finds plenty of opportunity to both evoke the tone of beloved *Mario* locales, while the anti-gravity, underwater and flying portions enable a lot more freedom

to bring them to life. It's all about attention to detail, building the world up, and in that regard *Mario Kart* excels. It isn't obsessed with pitted paint and the texture of grass blades being thrown in the wind. It's down to personality, from the way birds fly off the track as your kart comes rocketing towards them, to expressive mannerisms on each character's face, right down to logos and incidental details only visible when you look closely at the karts themselves. It's not there to represent realism, but rather adding to the personality of the world and that's where *Mario Kart* has never been bettered.



## Gamers will no doubt argue about the Wii U itself for years to come.

Whether it was a huge gaffe in Nintendo's

hardware history, a bold experiment that went wrong, or an underappreciated piece of kit that rarely got its due, it's certainly been a console that's been one of the more divisive. But one point that no one can disagree with is that Nintendo didn't try to make it the best machine it could, and *Mario Kart 8* is a sterling example of how the company understands

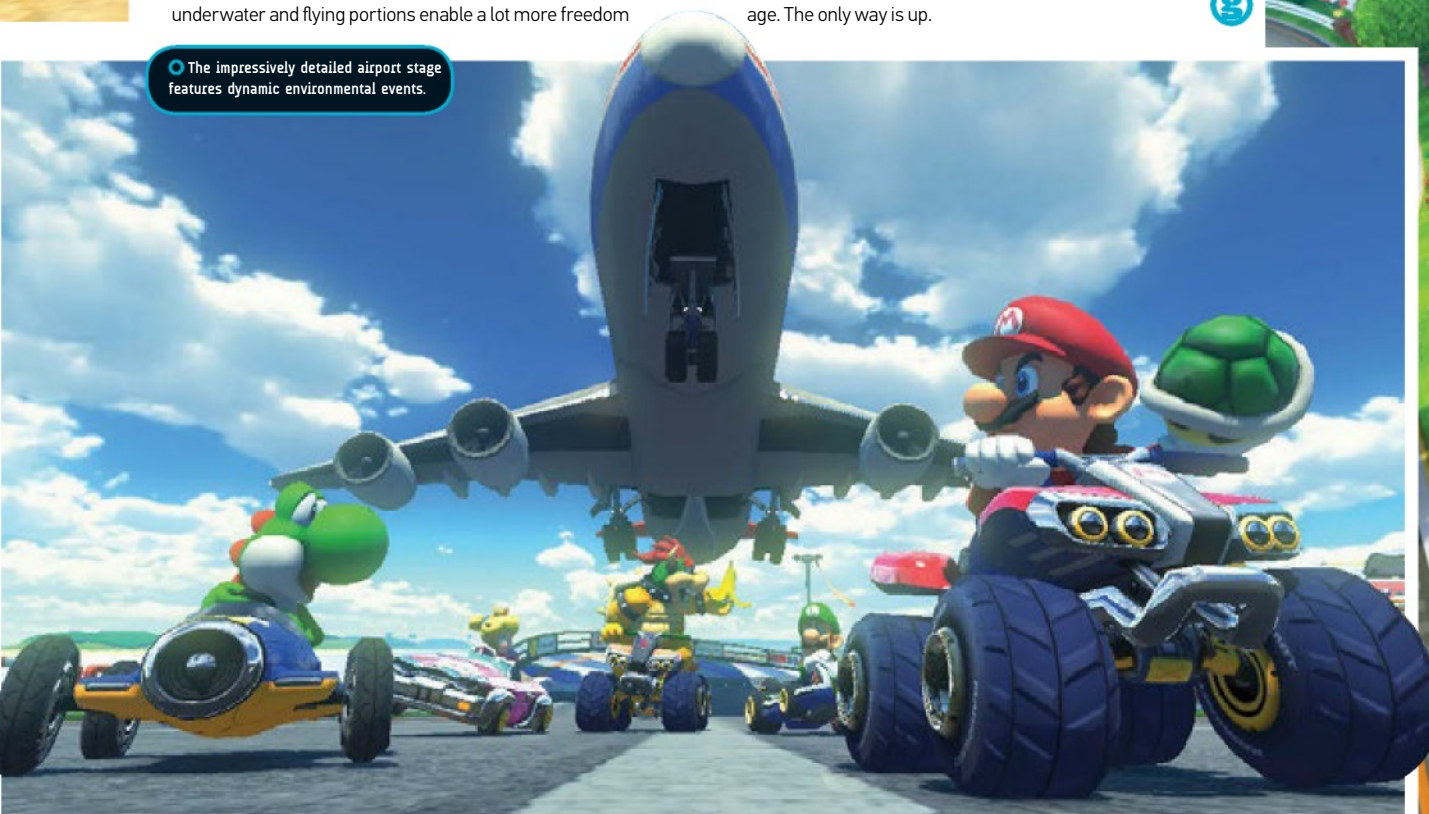
“It's all about attention to detail, building the world up, and in that regard *Mario Kart* excels”

how to make the most out of its machine.

Will it be enough to turn around the fortunes of the Wii U? In all honesty, that's looking unlikely, but it's also missing the point. *Mario Kart 8* is shaping up to be another essential multiplayer experience in a franchise that has never failed to deliver exactly that. It might not be a reason to buy a Wii U, but it leaves us with every reason to trust in Nintendo's ability to continue to deliver some of the most exciting, compelling and exquisitely crafted games ever and *Mario Kart* is just the beginning of a new age. The only way is up.



The impressively detailed airport stage features dynamic environmental events.











# CAMPO SANTO

## FROM WALKING DEAD TO FOREST FIRES

WHAT'S THE NEXT STEP AFTER A WILD SUCCESS LIKE THE WALKING DEAD OR MARK OF THE NINJA? TO START AGAIN FROM SCRATCH, APPARENTLY

**A**t last year's Game Developers Conference, Jake Rodkin, Sean Vanaman, and Nels Anderson ended up at the same party. Rodkin and Vanaman were coming down from an incredible year: Telltale's *The Walking Dead*, a project they led, had surpassed expectations with 8.5m episodes sold and numerous Game of the Year honours. Anderson, a game designer with Canadian studio Klei Entertainment, was in a similar position after shipping the acclaimed stealth side-scroller *Mark of the Ninja* the previous autumn.

"I've known Sean and Jake for years," says Anderson. "We would get together in San Francisco, and offhandedly at a »





» party Jake was like, '[Sean and I] are thinking about maybe leaving Telltale. You want to come make a weird first-person game?'"

Anderson wasn't job-hunting, but the proposition got his attention. "[Starting a studio] is one side of the process of making games that I'd never experienced – what does it look like, and what are the advantages and the challenges and interesting problems to solve, when it comes to creating something truly from nothing," he says. "But also, I don't think I would have left Klei just to work with any random people. [Sean and Jake are] talented people I've known for a long time, who have some very interesting, super cool ideas, and whose interests overlap with but also complement the stuff that I am interested in and am good at. It was like, even if the rocket ship explodes on the launch pad, this is one of those things that I'd much rather regret having done than having not done."

After *The Walking Dead's* runaway success, the decision to strike out on their own "wasn't a light bulb moment or anything," says Vanaman, who had been writing and designing episodic games for Telltale since 2008 – and when they brought it up at GDC, they weren't

■ Campo Santo's first game, *Firewatch*, has the tagline: 'Peace. Solitude. The Great Outdoors'

"WE GAVE OURSELVES THREE MONTHS TO GET A PITCH TOGETHER, AND GET THE MONEY TOGETHER"

even sure they wanted to. "We were excited about a lot of the stuff that was in the creative development of *Season Two*, but I was probably looking at five years of my life on *The Walking Dead*. If I think that I really only have twenty years to work on stuff with other people, then that was going to be too much of a percentage."

"It was just an easy opportunity," adds Rodkin, who started on Telltale's web team in 2006 and eventually moved into game design. "Going through all the stages of game development at Telltale up to leading a project that is then very successful – why risk screwing that up when you can instead see it as an opportunity to go and do something totally different?" If he'd stayed at Telltale, "It felt like I would effectively be doing the same thing over and over. Now I know nothing and I can learn everything from scratch again."

A few weeks earlier, while in the U.K. for the BAFTAs (where *The Walking Dead* had seven nominations and two wins), Rodkin and Vanaman had met up in a South London pub with Olly Moss, a freelance graphic designer in the film/entertainment industry. A mutual appreciation for each other's work had sparked a friendship over the internet, but this was their first time meeting in person. "It's a cliché to say it, but it's

## WHO IS CAMPO SANTO?

"WE ALL JUST DO THE STUFF WE'RE GOOD AT. THERE AREN'T 'ROLES' THE WAY THERE ARE AT BIGGER STUDIOS, WITH JOB TITLES AND STUFF" NELS ANDERSON

### JAKE RODKIN



**What he's good at:** Game design and UI design  
**Where he came from:** Started at

Telltale after his work on LucasArts fan sites samandmax.net and The International House of Mojo.  
**Highlights:** *Sam & Max: The Devil's Playhouse*, *Puzzle Agent 2*, *Poker Night At The Inventory*, *The Walking Dead*

### SEAN VANAMAN



**What he's good at:** Writing and game design  
**Where he came from:** Hired by Telltale

after being an associate producer at Disney Interactive Studios.  
**Highlights:** *Wallace & Gromit's Grand Adventures*, *Tales of Monkey Island*, *Sam & Max: The Devil's Playhouse*, *Puzzle Agent*, *The Walking Dead*

### NELS ANDERSON



**What he's good at:** Game design  
**Where he came from:** Born and raised in Wyoming;

currently lives in Vancouver, Canada where he worked at Klei Entertainment and Hothead Games.  
**Highlights:** *DeathSpank*, *Mark Of The Ninja*





amazing how well we all instantly clicked creatively. We spent the weekend batting about game ideas in a sort of pie-in-the-sky way. The types of games they wanted to make were the types of games I wanted to play," Moss recalls of the meeting. "I'm a huge gamer. I've always wanted to contribute to a game, but every time the opportunity arose it was always on some tertiary product – a poster or a print for the online store. I wanted to help make an actual game! And then my chance came, and it was with the best people I could imagine. It was a no-brainer."

With Anderson and Moss on board, Rodkin and Vanaman quietly left Telltale over the summer. "We're a group of people who are leaving the companies where we worked to make our own game, and right now you can say that about a humongous percentage of the games industry. It's interesting to me that everyone is going about it in a very different way," says Rodkin. "Some people are doing Kickstarters, some people are doing early alpha funding, some people are going through places like Indie Fund, some people are starting off with a game jam and burning all of their money away."

In forming Campo Santo, the four took a fairly traditional route: they prepared to court publishers, knowing they'd

■ The lighting engine at work in the game shows the power of Unity – a development tool many more studios are turning to.

■ The *Walking Dead* has had a deep influence on the Campo Santo guys – they want to incorporate its lessons into *Firewatch*.



probably have to give up some ownership and control in exchange for cash. "We [gave] ourselves about three months to get a full pitch put together, and get the money together. If that didn't happen we were going to have to start looking for work," Rodkin says. Around this time his friends Cabel Sasser and Steven Frank, co-owners of the Mac software developer Panic, visited San Francisco. "I was flipping through some really rough sketches [from Olly] on my iPhone, because I've known them for almost fifteen years and I was excited to show them the cool stuff we were starting to work on. They kept wanting me to flip back to one particular game pitch. And then they went back to Portland and I got an instant message saying, 'Hey, what if we paid for that game to exist?'"

Even though Rodkin hadn't meant to ask them for money, he jumped on the offer. "So much stuff came together in a month. We had a bunch of sketches from Olly, we had a rough concept for a game, Panic was immediately interested, and we were like, 'Oh, great, that's a load off everyone's life. We can actually do this.'" In December, Campo Santo moved into a small office – an apartment, really – with a main room, a kitchenette, two small conference rooms (one of which they rent out to the Idle Thumbs podcast – see boxout), and a rooftop deck that overlooks San Francisco's industrial Potrero Hill neighborhood. When they're not in town, Anderson and Moss beam in over two monitors set up at one end of the room. The rest of the seven person team sits in a cluster where everyone can see what everyone else is doing.

"We took the first week of December and we all moved in, and we built our desks and built our computers and did everything together as a group," Vanaman recalls. "Then we did a prototype sprint to see what we could build in two weeks. We'd never all worked together before, and none of us had

## OLLY MOSS



**What he's good at:** 2D art  
**Where he came from:** A freelance graphic artist

with a knack for recreating movie posters. Limited edition prints periodically go on sale from his website: [www.ollymoss.com](http://www.ollymoss.com)  
**Highlights:** *Resistance 3* box art, limited edition Star Wars trilogy prints

## JANE NG



**What she's good at:** 3D art  
**Where she came from:** Worked as an environment

artist and art lead at both EA and Double Fine.  
**Highlights:** *The Godfather*, *Spore*, *Brütal Legend*, *Stacking*, *The Cave*

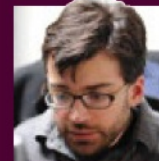
## WILL ARMSTRONG



**What he's good at:** Programming  
**Where he came from:** Gameplay programmer

of console games at Activision, LucasArts, and 2K Marin.  
**Highlights:** *BioShock 2*

## CHRIS REMO



**What he's good at:** Audio and game design  
**Where he came from:** Served variously

as a composer, writer, producer, and web developer at Double Fine and Irrational Games, after starting his career as a games journalist.  
**Highlights:** *The Cave* (co-writer), *Spacebase DF-9* (music), *Gone Home* (music)



» ever worked in Unity before, so we had to see, what can this group of people build in Unity in two weeks?" As this early prototype took shape, "It was refreshing to know we weren't going to completely fail."

"Our most productive, huge leaps forward are when the entire team's in the room at the same time, looking at one whiteboard for two hours," says Rodkin. Rather than coming up with a design document and handing this off to the rest of the team, as he and Vanaman would have at Telltale, they've opened up design to the entire group, relying on each member to contribute their own ideas, expertise, and strengths: "So many things in this game are new for everyone, it's way more reliant on complete team-wide conversation."

The initial group included the four founding members and two new hires, environment artist Jane Ng and programmer Will Armstrong. More recently, Chris Remo (another *Idle Thumbs* podcaster) signed on to do audio design and programming. They plan to hire a graphics programmer, but don't see the team getting much bigger than this for now.

"This is exactly the kind of team size I love working with. You don't really have time to dawdle," Anderson says. "Everyone knows what they need to do. When you've got to sync up and figure everything out, you sync up and figure everything out, because you don't have hierarchy and weird politics. It helps that all of us are experienced, too. We know what needs to be done, generally, to make a game, so we just have to solve the particular problems of making this game."

They didn't know each other at the time, but Sean Vanaman and Nels Anderson grew up near each other in Cody and Jackson, Wyoming. "If you drew a line between [the towns], and then put a dot on the halfway point of that line, it's almost exactly where this game is set, on the southeast corner of Yellowstone National Park," says Vanaman of *Firewatch*, Campo Santo's first project. "It's an area of the world that I was fascinated by growing up. It's this [valley] known as the Thorofare, it was a very heavily trafficked thoroughfare for trappers, especially, and Native Americans. But it's very remote. You pack in. You don't go for the day; you go for the week or two weeks or three weeks. And it's full of grizzly bears. People die there all the time."

In *Firewatch*, a man named Henry leaves behind a life in turmoil to spend the summer manning an isolated fire lookout for the National Forest Service. Playing as Henry, you'll explore the area and discuss your findings with his boss, a woman in a nearby lookout tower who can be contacted by radio at any time. "She's his connection to the outside world. He spots fires, he calls them in, they triangulate them, and she reports them to the Forest Service. And while he's out there, he discovers some things that aren't quite right and begins to wonder if there's more to his experience in isolation than meets the eye," Vanaman explains. "You're plunging the depths of two mysteries. One is his own brain – what sort of baggage did you bring with you out into the woods – and the other is what previously happened in these woods, and what is currently happening in these woods."

Looking to *Metroid* for inspiration, Campo Santo dove into *Firewatch*'s design by developing a world map that defines the space where the story unfolds. "There are areas of that world map where we were like 'Put cool thing here,'" Vanaman says of the early design process. "You'll find things that allow you to access new areas of the forest, and in those new areas you'll learn something new about the story, and you'll contextualise what you've learned through Henry [and] make a decision about how he communicates to his boss about it."

Such open-ended exploration may be intrinsically different from the games the duo collaborated on at Telltale, but it's a style they've long been drawn to. "A huge majority of the games [Sean and I] play, that are about experiencing a big world and exploring spaces, are first-person games," Rodkin says. "We've played a lot of *Left 4 Dead* and *Team Fortress* for multiplayer stuff, and big huge open things like *Far Cry* or *DayZ* or, even for me, just wandering around the space in *Minecraft* is so enveloping as a personal experience. It's something that we've never had an opportunity to make."

In spite of those influences, *Firewatch* is decidedly not a shooter. Its core mechanic will be talking to Henry's supervisor over the radio – you'll be able to explore the area, target interesting spots with a reticule, and initiate dialogue about what you've seen. "We love first-person games where somebody's talking in your ear, like GLaDOS in *Portal* or Atlas in *BioShock*,"



■ Olly Moss' minimalism perfectly match Campo Santo's vision.



■ Expect the game to focus on a distinctly fiery colour palette – a large component of the game's visual language.





■ *Firewatch's* concept art resounds with an eldritch loneliness, something we expect to recur in-game.

says Vanaman. "When they pipe up, I'm like, 'Oh yeah! What are they going to say?' It's really exciting. And you can never talk back. We wanted a game where you could talk back." These interactions will be similar to *The Walking Dead's* choice-driven gameplay, with dialogue selections influencing the relationship Henry builds with his supervisor and tailoring the experience.

"It's interesting for us to see how much we can make people start doing things both because they want to and because they think it's what would be good for Henry, or they think it's what Henry would do," Rodkin says. One way they hope to achieve this is by giving their hero a face and a body. Even though the world is seen from Henry's point of view, he'll be modelled and animated, with his hands and arms visible as he interacts with his environment. While Moss's art style isn't hyper-realistic, the team hopes players will be able to relate to and empathise with Henry as a human being much like they did *The Walking Dead's* stylized characters. ("If Lee Everett walked up to you on the street, you'd freak," Rodkin points out.) *Firewatch's* Yellowstone, too, will be stylised but true to life – "reinterpreted from reality through Olly's eyes," as Vanaman puts it. Moss says the biggest influence on the visual style is the classic WPA National Parks posters of the Thirties: "The aim is not to slavishly replicate their style, but to create an environment that feels like it might have directly influenced their original artists. Shapes and colours are exaggerated. Textures simplified."

Vanaman describes the Yellowstone of his youth as "a really special place – there's geothermal activity, there's aspen groves with bright green in the summer and bright yellow in the fall, there's lakes and streams and beaver dams and canyons, and burned-out woods, old hunting camps and old homesteads that you don't expect to find." All of these are details they want to incorporate. "We want you to be able to look out from your tower at the very beginning of this game – the lookout towers have glass windows all the way around – and be able to say, 'I really want to go to there, and there, and there, and there, and there.' And to know that you can't get there yet, but you'll see a huge chunk of it by the time you're done," adds Rodkin.

They may be a small group working out of an apartment, but Campo Santo doesn't consider itself "indie" by today's definition. "If the word indie was a party, it's so full at this point that we can step out of that room," Rodkin says. "Our game is obviously not

"IF THE  
WORD INDIE  
WAS A  
PARTY, IT'S  
SO FULL  
AT THIS  
POINT THAT  
WE CAN  
STEP OUT  
OF THAT  
ROOM"



■ The small studio setup aids creativity and the flow of fresh ideas in ways larger studios can't.



■ Communication is key for Campo Santo, and the geography of their office has been built to reflect that.

idle thumbs

## IDLE THUMBS

■ **CAMPO SANTO ISN'T** Jake Rodkin and Sean Vanaman's first joint venture. In 2012, along with Chris Remo, they launched a Kickstarter to fund future episodes of their *Idle Thumbs* podcast ([www.idlethumbs.net](http://www.idlethumbs.net)), which had been on hiatus since 2010. They hit their \$30k goal within two hours and ended up with nearly \$137k contributed by more than 2600 listeners to keep the show afloat.

In its current incarnation *Idle Thumbs* is a weekly independent podcast where Rodkin, Vanaman, Remo, and Nick Breckon (currently working at Telltale on *The Walking Dead Season Two*) discuss the games they're playing, working on, and excited about. They make a point of recording with all of the hosts and guests in the same room, rather than over Skype.

Since the Kickstarter, *Idle Thumbs* has expanded into a network that hosts shows for game industry friends, including *Three Moves Ahead*, a weekly strategy and war game podcast hosted by Rob Zacny and Troy Goodfellow, and the semi-monthly *Tone Control*, during which Steve Gaynor (writer/designer of last year's indie hit *Gone Home*) conducts in-depth interviews with notable developers like Jonathan Blow and Clint Hocking. Soon after Campo Santo's formation, Nels Anderson joined up with the *Terminal7* podcast, devoted to discussing the living card game *Android: Netrunner* with fellow Vancouver game developer Jesse Turner.

without risk, but the risks we have are closer to a traditional game deal than an indie game deal. We're a team who have all worked to ship commercial games, we've worked to ship games for publishers, and now we're working [from] day one in an office with equipment, with a fully funded game." Vanaman agrees, "We have no business going to that party. We like everyone in that party, but we would feel like posers."

The relationship with Panic has been beneficial not only because of the funding, but also because the Portland-based developer – whose eclectic body of work includes the FTP client Transmit, authorised *Katamari Damacy* and *Noby Noby Boy* tee shirts, and one of the earliest MP3 players, Audion – is a company Campo Santo hopes to emulate. "They've been around for over a decade. They're a company that makes products they want people to like, that's their whole mission," Vanaman says. "It's cool to see those guys as [people who] never let anyone else own their company. No one's ever owned any of the stuff that they've made," Rodkin adds. "They've been able to stay very focused, and they've never had external pressure saying, 'You have to ship on this day, you have to grow your company to three times its size because we think that's your exit strategy.' As of right now, we haven't done anything yet, but it's good to be hanging out with the guys for whom that has been their edict. Their expectation for us is not to do anything crazy either. They're trying to help us do what they've done."





# END OF DAYZ

Billed as the next DayZ, zombies would be a picnic compared to this, the most brutal society ever simulated. Welcome to Rust. Prepare to die. Horribly.



■ Consider the rock... the rock... the rock...  
Specifically, its head-smashing potential.



## "THAT'S WHAT PEOPLE WANT - MORE FREEDOM, MORE BUILDING, FEWER PEOPLE SHOOTING THEM IN THE FACE"

**R**ust is a game about bastardry. Sure, it can be about teamwork and everybody getting along, but more often than not it's about pure selfish survival. For reasons that don't matter and aren't even explained, you wake up naked and alone in a somewhat pretty but very lethal world with little but a rock to your name and the ability to bring it down hard on heads. From there, it's up to you and those you meet what happens next. Hunt, gather, build, craft, form communities, launch raids or hope to be blessed, cargo cult style, with one of the coveted drops from the planes that occasionally pass over your radioactive new home. It's like *Minecraft* and *DayZ* had a baby, then realised it would make a really effective club to beat people to death with.

And it's been insanely, unbelievably successful. Creator Garry Newman is best known for *Garry's Mod* – the phenomenally popular physics sandbox for Valve's

Source Engine, which has made over \$30 million over the last nine years. *Rust* beat that total in three months after hitting Steam Early Access, and it's not even finished. It's barely even gotten warmed up.

"We kind of put it on Steam to make it easier for people to access it who had already bought it from our website, so we weren't expecting anything," says Newman, pausing to look at the sales and seeing that at the time of writing they were 1.4 million. "It's been a massive surprise. I think it has struck a note; right time and right place. We've been lucky a couple of times with that, like *Garry's Mod* just breaking at the right time with Steam and selling games online."

As for the game's origin, Newman makes no bones about *Rust*'s inspiration, happily saying: "We started as a *DayZ* kind of rip-off and then moved into the *Minecraft* thing." It's already a very different game to either of them though, finding a brutal sweet spot that forces players to sweat and bleed for every achievement but also provides the tools to shape the environment and forge communities out of fire and stone.

"That's what people want more than anything – more freedom, more building, fewer people shooting them in the face," says Newman. "It is kinda harsh right now, and I think that's what people want in a way. But it's up to us to push people in the direction of 'Oh, you can be friends and life's better if you co-operate.' The game will find its feet. Think *Counter-Strike* when it first came out. Everyone was running around all over the place, but then people realised they were only going to win by working together."



■ A lesson you soon learn – just because someone is holding out a rock doesn't mean they can't switch to a gun.

**W**hat really separates *Rust* from most games though is how much Newman and team are willing to put their money where their mouths are in the name of player freedom. Actively cheating isn't welcome. Everything else? Fair game. When implementing doors for instance, the team could have opted for a whitelist system to allow only friends through. Instead, it looked to a passcode system on the grounds that that would be more interesting. When you log out of the game, by default your body remains in the world, forcing you to find shelter if you don't want to find yourself dead and all your stuff gone next time you log in. Players who want to get in, though, are welcome to literally beat your doors down or bring explosives, meaning that the best security is sleeping somewhere friends can watch your back. The rules are always changing. In a recent test for instance, backpacks dropped on death would be protected for a while to make it easier to retrieve your things. With a lock pick though, another player – perhaps a bandit – could bypass that and start digging immediately.

"People gaming the system is something we want to encourage. It's a reason people play *Rust*. A lot of games got to the point where it was really easy to do everything, and everything was taught four times before you had



■ Animals can be more dangerous than people. They're always aggressive, don't care what gear you've got, and will follow you across the map for their dinner.





■ Red bears and wolves are the new zombies, guarding the radioactive structures. There are goodies inside those, but steer clear. Their guards will crush you.

## "PLAYERS FIND THE BALANCING. YOU GIVE THEM AN OVERPOWERED WEAPON AND THE OTHERS WILL FIND A WAY TO COUNTER THAT"

» to do it and there was no learning curve. I think games are moving in a way where you don't need to teach every single thing. The fun of the game can be learning by yourself and achieving on your own. In the same way, when a player on a server does something really, really odd, players like that because it ups the challenge. There's no balancing at all. Players find the balancing. You give them an overpowered weapon and the others will find a way to counter that."

To a large extent, this is also what makes *Rust* exciting. Nobody playing it has any idea where it's ultimately going, because neither do its creators. Everything is up for change. First the zombies were

escorted out and Newman would like to extend that to the various buildings around the map. While they add a sense of history, besides supplying additional threats like radiation zones – that players can opt to brave in the hope of finding precious resources within – but they also go against his vision of a player-run community and he would much prefer every structure to be player-built and every server unique. His vision of an endgame is a World War type setup, where players naturally form into camps and fight it out. "People find divisions in each other, don't they?" But even that isn't locked down. "Whether that happens in the end or people just start co-operating, we don't know."

It's also worth noting that every server can have its own rules and atmosphere. There are PvE servers for instance, where you have nothing to fear but wildlife and the elements, and others with variably harsh rules. Each is its own little society, with the admin having a whole host of powers to set whether or not, for instance, you're safe while asleep (logged off). This is also how creators Facepunch Studios are keeping tabs on how features are going down. "Any internal decisions that we're really struggling with, we make it a setting. If people only want to play on non-sleeper servers, then we know (that idea) was a massive mistake."

Along with this flexibility, *Rust*'s other big asset is that Facepunch has no interest in playing things safe. Its characters are naked for instance not just because they're not wearing trousers – though trousers can be crafted – but because it's something that wouldn't normally be done. "That's why. That's exactly why. Because why not? We still get parents asking if the game is suitable for children because they heard there's nudity, and it's... yeah, it's suitable, but you're hitting each other over the head with rocks!" While this Darwinian nightmare of an island is oddly limited to only male characters, other social experiments are very much still on the table. "One thing we've thought about is whether we should add children and would people want to kill them with rocks, or would they feel like emotionally they shouldn't? We don't want to just make a game that's like every other game we've played. We'd consider adding children because we've never really seen it done."



■ Hunt or be hunted? It's not really an either/or situation in *Rust*.





The downside of the game in its current form is that while it has amazing potential, there's still relatively little to actually do but stay alive long enough to craft the available gear, build a shack and sit in it. It's possible to join with other players and build towns, with role-play and socialisation through voice-chat, but far more commonly the interactions consist of being shot in the back of the head by someone who worked their way up to a gun or being trolled by a squeaky-voiced teen. Even so, players have already made terrific use out of the tools available, with many online diaries and YouTube videos showing off what a little human ingenuity and a heaping pile of schadenfreude can do. "You get a lot of stories back, and that's what we were hoping," says Newman. "People don't play a single-player game and then tell you the story and that it was great. In *Rust*, everyone makes their own stories..."

Longer term though, *Rust* has a few advantages that its rivals don't, not least that *DayZ*'s scavenger focused aesthetic doesn't lend itself well to trying to save the world (leaving little to do but treat the world as a sandbox) while *Minecraft* is never going to have the same edge that makes any achievement feel meaningful and adds the all important level of "Thank you for not beating me over the head/stealing my stuff/locking me in a hut" to *Rust*'s bursts of camaraderie. Bright light is after all seen all the more clearly in the darkness. Literally, when you're wandering around in the pitch blackness with a torch, so be careful in the wilds...

**W**here *Minecraft* and other competitors like *Everquest Next Landmark* easily has the advantage is on the limit of player creativity in terms of the world. Right now, players are limited to more or less just wooden shacks and a few spiky things, with little real scope to build something personal and worth defending for any reason beyond raw scale. But that's due to change. Firstly, additions like farming are on the way,

## QUEST FOR PANTS

Surviving your first few hours in *Rust*



**1** You start with a rock, some torches, and a medical kit. This bounty will not last long.

You need a few basic tools, and the only way to get them is to start crafting. Press TAB to bring up a list of known recipes. The first priority should be the Stone Hatchet.



**2** Go up to a tree and introduce it to Mr. Rock.

Now repeat with some stone. Not just any stone though – it's only harvestable from the big lumps in the world, which vanish after a while. You may need to explore a while before you find one.



**3** Craft the Hatchet to speed up progress. It's not much of a weapon, but it

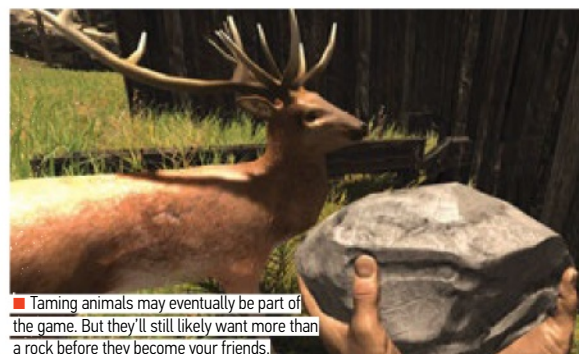
beats a rock. Animals drop meat, which you can cook and eat, but mostly they drop cloth. You need cloth for bandages and to craft your first weapon, a bow.



**4** Now you've got enough stuff to not want to lose it on death, it's time to build a sleeping bag and a house around it. That's a respawn point for when you die, giving you a shot at getting your stuff back. Anything in Storage Boxes will also survive your death.



**5** Go forth and explore! Remember, you're naked and vulnerable. This is the time to use the bow to get cloth for at least pants, though it'll be a long time before you're cool. Try to make friends who can offer help and protection. Just be careful who you trust.



■ Taming animals may eventually be part of the game. But they'll still likely want more than a rock before they become your friends.



■ At the moment, servers have up to 300 players online. Even so, there are long periods of time where you won't see anyone.

as well as new craftables. More fundamentally though, Newman and team are working on an item editor that could allow for the addition of any new item to the game. That's not a promise, just a hope, but the advantages are clear. "It's obvious the public can work faster than us, so if we release it and they add fifty new items a month, that's a win." This would likely work like the Steam Workshop for games like *Dota 2* and *Team Fortress 2*, with players creating and voting on additions, but Facepunch having final say on what actually makes it in.

**A**s for really unlocking what you can do with the world, ie a *Garry's Mod* level of power, Newman makes no promises, but

does admit it's definitely a possibility – especially when *Rust* is upgraded to the newest version of Unity. "At the moment with Unity there's a 64,000 physics objects limit. In the new version, that's gone, so once we move to it, it should be unlimited. We can do that kind of thing right now, but we haven't reached the point where we want vehicles and things like that."

However it ends up developing though, *Rust* has 30 million reasons to have a bright future – and counting. At a time when both *DayZ* and *Minecraft* are bedded in and known quantities, it's a brave new world that gets to both learn from their examples and create itself a whole new future. Just don't necessarily expect a warm welcome, and if you get one, don't be too surprised when it's a trap. Survival is a goal, not a guarantee. Not here. Not ever.



■ One day all this will be yours, until that is some dastardly shits jump you, take all that have and leave you for dead on the rocks.



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**The Post-Apocalyptic**

# **Survival Guide**

**According to videogames**

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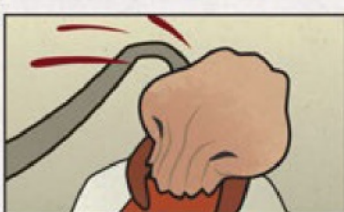
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## Improvise as seen in Half-Life



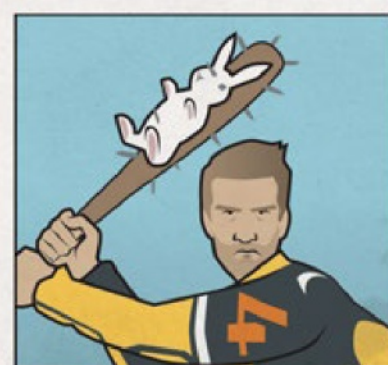
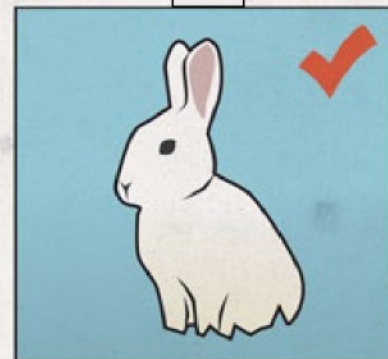
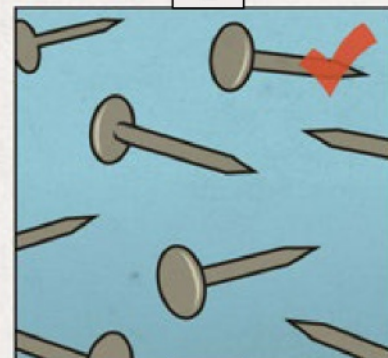
## Build Shelter as seen in Minecraft



As the sun sets on another day of toil, misery and despair, make sure you've established an adequate shelter to keep out those horrific 8-bit creatures that stalk the night.



## Weapons as seen in Dead Rising





## Stick Together as seen in Left 4 Dead

It doesn't matter whether you fellow survivors are shrill-voiced pre-pubescents with little understanding of common courtesy. Form a defensive strategy.



## Don't Trust Anyone as seen in DayZ

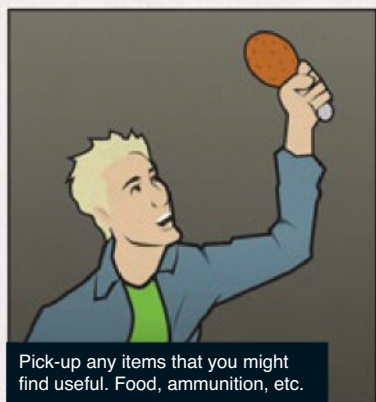
That guy in the distance? He's not your friend. He's another potential enemy more dangerous than any shambling undead hungry for tasty skull meat.



Pro Tip: Don't be an idiot. Always be armed (if no weapon is available, run).



## Stockpile Necessary Supplies as seen in Fallout



Pick-up any items that you might find useful. Food, ammunition, etc.



Try to avoid junk, otherwise you may become over-encumbered.





## Don't Love

As seen in The Walking Dead



## Fortify

As seen in Call Of Duty: World At War





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# Reviews

**100** The Elder Scrolls Online  
PC, PS4, Xbox One

**104** Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster  
Vita, PS3

**106** Lego The Hobbit  
PS3, PS4, Vita, Wii U, 3DS,  
Xbox 360, Xbox One, PC

**108** Hearthstone:  
Heroes Of Warcraft  
PC, Mac, iOS, Android

**110** Kinect Sports Rivals  
Xbox One

**112** Age of Wonders III  
PC

**114** Goat Simulator  
PC

**115** BioShock Infinite:  
Burial At Sea Episode 2  
PC, PS3, Xbox 360

**116** Diablo III:  
Reaper Of Souls  
PC, PS4, Xbox One

**118** Tales of Symphonia  
PS3

**120** Betrayal  
PC

**121** Spate  
PC

**123** The Witch And The  
Hundred Knight  
PS3

**124** Out There  
Android, iOS

**125** Luftrausers  
PC, PS3, Vita

**125** 10 Second Ninja  
PC

## 100 THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE

Can you handle  
not being the  
only hero?







## THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.



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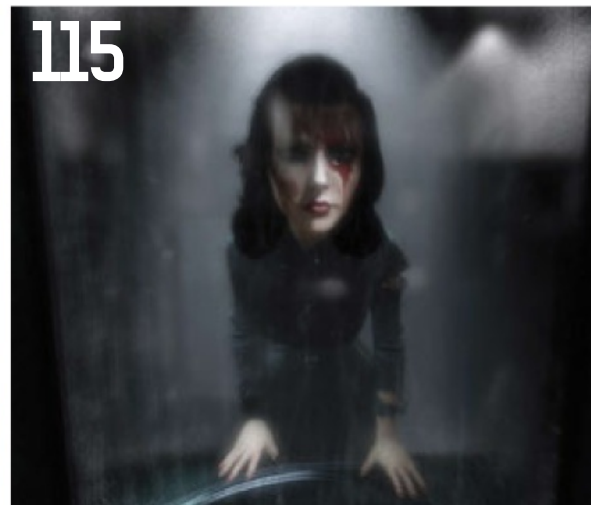
106



112



108



115



110

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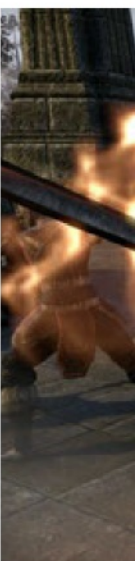




THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE WAS NEVER GOING TO BE AS EVOLVED AS WORLD OF WARCRAFT WHEN ONE'S JUST CRAWLED FROM THE MMO SWAMP AND THE OTHER'S BEEN SWINGING IN THE TREETOPS FOR AN AGE ALREADY

### KING OF THE HILL

Whereas in most MMOs PVP is considered endgame material – something that only the elite players can enjoy – in *Elder Scrolls* PVP is merely the main event in a region that has plenty else to offer. If you want to wander through Cyradill picking up the odd quest, that's fine. If you'd rather fight for your faction and get one of your own on the Ruby Throne, even better, because the three-way battle at the heart of *Elder Scrolls Online* is very much the jewel in its crown. Winning a campaign seems simple enough, for it requires amassing more points (earned by capturing and holding keeps) than the other two sides before the warfare timer ticks down – which can last months. The to-ing and fro-ing of siege weapons and taking part in lightning raids to capture the villages, mills, farms and mines necessary to keep repair resources high puts us in mind of a fantasy *PlanetSide 2*.





WE CAN BE HEROES

# The Elder Scrolls Online

## DETAILS

FORMAT: PC  
 ORIGIN: US  
 PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks  
 DEVELOPER: ZeniMax Online Studios  
 PRICE: £39.99  
 RELEASE: Out now  
 PLAYERS: MMO  
 ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

It's a tough ask to follow up any game, let alone one of the most confident and successful RPG series of the last 20 years and, in *Skyrim* especially, arguably one of the very best games of the 360/PS3 generation (in spite of the PS3 version's obstinate woes). But to introduce not just multiplayer to the proceedings, but mass multiplayer at that, is to range *Elder Scrolls Online* not only against its celebrated and much-liked predecessors, but a veritable titan among games; by which, of course, we mean *World Of Warcraft*.

Blizzard's MMORPG may be half the game it used to be in terms of player numbers, but the last we heard there are still six million people roaming the lands of Azeroth. Given that in November the oldest among them will have adventured there for ten years makes the *World of Warcraft*'s persistence all the more impressive. Even with the might of *Elder Scrolls* now ranged against it, it's hard to imagine Blizzard's flagship game failing any time soon.

Will we still be playing *Elder Scrolls Online* in a decade? As it stands today, almost certainly not, which isn't to say Bethesda's online debut doesn't deserve to survive long into the future, only to point out in the extraordinarily long life of an MMO, a lot can and invariably does change, often beyond the

game itself. We'd likely have said the same for *WOW*'s chances back in 2004.

The truth is that even after five-ish years of pre-production and development *The Elder Scrolls Online* was never going to be as evolved as *World Of Warcraft* when one's just crawled from the MMO swamp and the other's been swinging in the treetops for an age already. Comparing new and long-established MMOs is rarely a wise thing to do.

Tell you what though, *Elder Scrolls Online*

isn't as far down the evolutionary ladder as might be expected. The amount of content in the game is impressive, not just that there are plenty of places to go (a good 50% of Tamriel is immediately accessible with the rest held over for the inevitable expansions) but also that there's so much to do, most of which take its cues from offline *Elder Scrolls*. The quests are fully-voiced, the breadth of crafting is satisfying and familiar, exploration is encouraged and the combat systems, while just a little stymied due to the nature of multiplayer gaming, is evolved and fluid. But it's the breadth with which you can discover your own path rather than be forced down character progression routes designed to

suit the play-styles of others, is one of the many ways in which it doesn't feel like you're playing yet another MMO.

There are only four player classes to choose from – Dragon Knight, Sorcerer, Nightblade and Templar (effectively warrior, wizard, rogue and cleric) – but thanks to skill progression being based around actions rather than experience point grind, its possible to develop highly potent and flexible hybrids for most eventualities. Add in guild and racial skills

trees and you'd be hard pressed to point out a more versatile or layered character progression system.

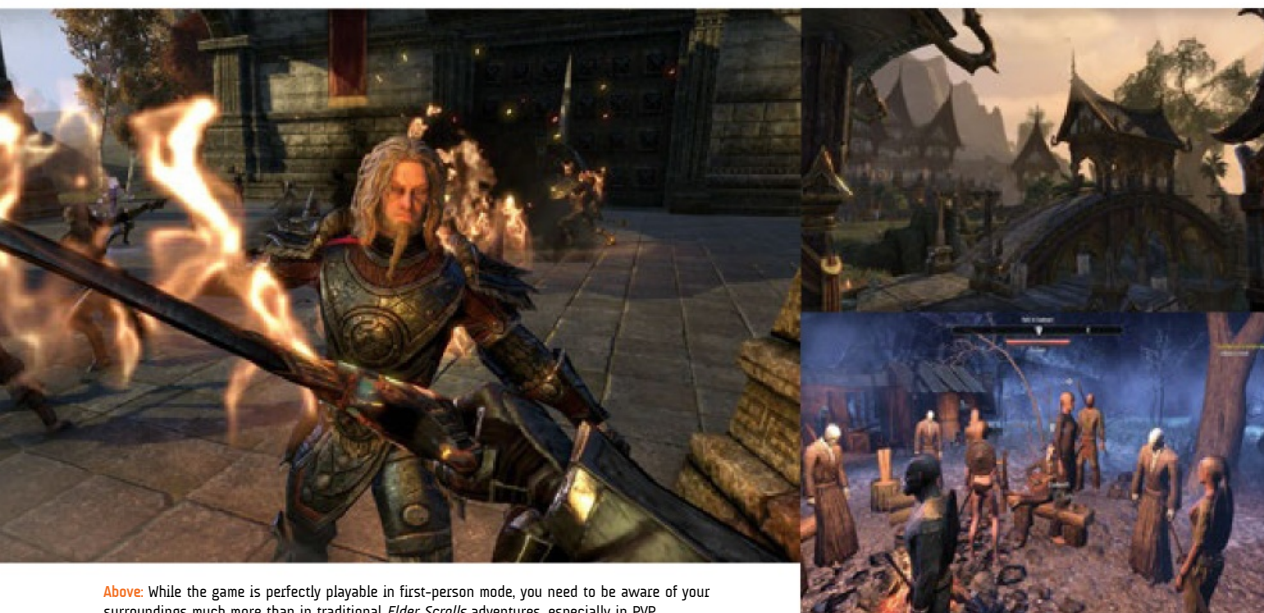
Of course the triumvirate of DPS, tank and support are key, and the closer you can fit your build to one of those three roles the more successful you will be when you invariably square up to other players in the central PVP realm of Cyrodiil. What's refreshing is how far you can simultaneously develop your character to do the things that you enjoy, which if you're an *Elder Scrolls* fan first and an MMO player a distant second, probably means heading out in various different directions and seeing where you end up and with whom.

## WORLDWIDE

### TAKING GAMING ONLINE

**DARK AGE:** The three way war for Tamriel's central region takes equal inspiration from *Dark Age Of Camelot* and *Guild Wars 2*, probably the two best examples of PVP any fantasy MMO has ever offered.

Left: Tamriel's nine races are divided equally among the three warring factions. Each race has its bonuses, but the important choice is class. Even then, there's a lot of room to develop down multiple skill paths.



Above: While the game is perfectly playable in first-person mode, you need to be aware of your surroundings much more than in traditional *Elder Scrolls* adventures, especially in PVP.



Left: It's not *Elder Scrolls* unless you start the game in a dungeon with no memory of how you got there.

Unfortunately for those hoping otherwise, there's no getting around the fact that *Elder Scrolls Online* is an MMO. Once the stirring and familiar *Game Of Thrones*-ey theme subsides and your carefully sculpted character emerges from the traditional get-out-of-jail tutorial, your arrival to the shores of Tamriel will only be partially familiar. For example if you side with the Ebonheart Pact, you'll start not too far from the lands of Morrowind, a place we've not been able to explore with this fidelity before. Unfortunately, the wonder of being amongst all that strange medusae-like flora and fauna after so many years since is tempered by all the renovations than have been made to accommodate the masses; the streets being too wide and the cities too spread out to be practical for the local population.

Of course it's all the people running about the place that are to blame, talking to the same NPCs you are, taking on the same quests, collecting the same rewards and often getting in your way just a little too often for it to feel like you're the hero in the story. If there's one thing guaranteed to break the spell in an RPG, it's someone running about in bra and pants calling themselves Bumface. It wouldn't be so bad if you could lop their head off for crimes against immersion, but alas.

For many people buying into *Elder Scrolls Online*, all that meta-silliness is par for the course, and its for them that this first online chapter is more directly aimed and who will more likely enjoy the subtle changes from MMO convention that *Elder Scrolls* diehards will find more jarring. Things like the need to put a little more effort into finding quests rather than have absurd signposts above NPC heads. Similarly since the raw materials needed for crafting are a little more tricky to locate than in most MMOs, those who prefer the domestic delights of making clothes or forging weapons will have to travel



**IF THERE'S ONE THING GUARANTEED TO BREAK THE SPELL IN AN RPG, IT'S SOMEONE RUNNING ABOUT IN A BRA AND PANTS CALLING THEMSELVES BUMFACE**

#### FAQs

##### Q. DO I HAVE TO GROUP?

Unlike most MMOs you can get through *Elder Scrolls Online* without much aid from any other players, but the fact they're everywhere is hard to set aside.

##### Q. DO THEY HAVE NAMES LIKE GIMLI AND FRODO?

Numbers aren't allowed in characters names, but that hasn't stopped people coming up with colourful monikers.

##### Q. WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO AVOID THEM?

You could play *Skyrim* again?

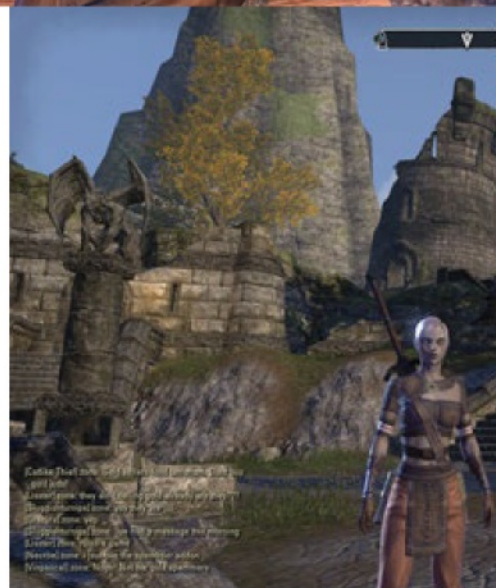
**Right:** If you ever wondered what the world of Tamriel was like beyond the borders of *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*, *The Elder Scrolls Online* probably offers the best way to find out... for a monthly price.

a little further out than they may be used to in other online games. Then there's the fairly inconsequential XP gain you receive from battle, meaning that instead of farming mobs, you're compelled to work through the various stories to progress your character to its level 50 goal. The aforementioned skill trees aren't perhaps as easy to grasp as the system in, say, *Guild Wars 2* or *Rift*, but that doesn't make them any less worthy. Time will tell if people do end up gravitating to the usual flavour-of-the-month builds, but the potential is there for character development to be more diverse than we tend to get in most fantasy MMOs.

Where the game shines, diversity and breadth of content aside, is in spite of the MMO concessions made, how much of *Elder Scrolls* – and what has made *Elder Scrolls* so enjoyable for so long – remains in place and so pushes vast-scale multiplayer gaming just a little bit further than we've seen before. The attack/block combat system is easy to overlook as an innovation because it is so familiar and established, but when you eventually find yourself toe-to-toe with a character directed by another human being, it feels that much more natural and evolved. True, PVP is often a frantic mess of flailing swords and axes and occasionally marred by lag (and/or whining), but the thrill of applying



**Above:** This bonkers pan-weaving fellow is Cadwell. It probably won't surprise you to learn that he is voiced by ex-Python John Cleese.





**Below:** The combat system is recognisable from *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*, with mouse buttons mapped to attack and block. By watching for attack cues, you can opt to break an attack and follow it through with a heavy blow.



## WE HAD A LAUNCH PROBLEM

■ Bethesda's method of circumventing segregated shards is to utilise 'megaservers', a system of dynamic behind-the-scenes switching that acts to spread players around so that no area is too full or too empty and everyone has a pleasant lag-free time. In theory it's probably brilliant (and from a PR perspective it's genius, since you never have to announce any server closures when the popularity of the game plummets), but in practise we've found it less than ideal. Rather than try to jump on a server temporary flagged as lightly populated, with *Elder Scrolls Online* you can only click Play and hope you get assigned somewhere relatively quiet. For the first couple of days we rarely were, and gave up on logging in during peak hours, annoyingly limiting our access to the crack of dawn.



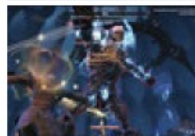
skills earned via hours in *Oblivion* and *Skyrim* to multiplayer objectives is undeniable. The likes of *Mount & Blade*, *Chivalry* and *War Of The Roses* offer a better melee mechanic, but not on this scale, nor with such persistence.

■ It's also worth pointing out that *The Elder Scrolls Online* is a very attractive game. Much has been written about the worry that perhaps it doesn't quite come close to the fidelity of *Skyrim*, which is true in the case of the PC's high def texture pack, but it's not far off the mark. Given the expanse of the landscape and the potentially vast numbers of players milling around, the *Elder Scrolls Online*'s graphics aren't just as good as most offline RPGs, it's easily the most graphically accomplished online game we've played and one that performs well on relatively modest hardware. A few launch hiccups aside, the issues that are and will continue to dog *Elder Scrolls Online* are entirely down to perception. If your hope for a sixth *Elder Scrolls* was always for a sequel set across a hitherto unexplored region of Tamriel; a game in which you could be the focus and aspire to be the sole hero, developing exclusive and ancient powers along the way, then *Elder Scrolls Online* was never going to cut it. Likewise if you're the kind of veteran MMO gamer who has to hit the level cap as quickly as possible to forever grind raids to attain the best gear, *TESO*'s

## TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

### THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

#### 1 HOUR



○ Assuming you didn't spend an age designing your character, you should have ascended from the tutorial realm of Coldharbour and be on the shores of Tamriel to start your adventure.

#### 8 HOURS



○ Level 10 should be within reach, which means the central region of Cyrodiil, around which the game's PVP revolves, will be unlocked and the real multiplayer fun can begin.

#### 160 HOURS



○ The level cap is where most MMOs wind down and content thins out. In *Elder Scrolls Online* you can visit the lands of the other factions and try their quests, adapted to suit your level.

## MISSING LINK

### WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

**HERO'S JOURNEY** The presence of other people does detract significantly from the 'monomyth' that gives *Elder Scrolls* its focus. Better perhaps to have focused on PVP Cyrodiil as the whole game?

slower pace and exhaustive content may well feel tiresome and laboured.

Sure, there's a case to answer for whether a subscription is appropriate, or perhaps that the PVP could have been given from the solo-centric questing (which might have better appeased the two target audiences), but the game is what it is and in spite of being stretched a little between two RPG

mindsets, the supporting structures of content and mechanics are solid enough to lift the game above most of its peers, be they offline or on. Whether the game might bring together the mindset of the solo quester in line with their nemesis, we have to admit to remaining sceptical, but then so few developers have tried to bridge the gap that you have to admire the attempt. What Bethesda has succeeded at doing is making online role-playing that little bit more accessible, while offering massively-multiplayer fans the access to a world they've likely been as keen to explore as any other in the history of gaming. That the development team has been able to retain the mechanisms of play together with the depth of the content in the face of a breed of gamer whose capacity to consume is unrivalled, is perhaps the game's biggest achievement. Now all Bethesda has to do is keep up the pace.

**VERDICT 8/10**

TAKE YOUR 'I'M THE ONLY ONE' HAT OFF





Above: The environments once more resound with that muted elegance that the PS2 release brought us, each location clearly designed with its own flavour and feel in mind.

PRAISE BE TO YEVON

# Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster

It's been almost 13 years since we first saw Yuna and her cohort of Guardians set out on their pilgrimage to Zanarkand, and in that time, we've seen games with far better voice acting, far more impressive visuals and far bigger worlds come and go. Thing is, none of them have managed to penetrate the collective gaming consciousness quite as powerfully as *Final Fantasy X* did. Looking back on the game now, it's clear why the title's had such an enduring, waterproof legacy.

Right from the start, the Remaster is keen to show you just how much work has gone into this title – this isn't your bog standard HD re-release where everything's just been bumped up to a 1080p output. No, this is a full on reworking – from the original soundtrack being rearranged, rerecorded and revitalised, to the character models receiving a full

## DETAILS

FORMAT: Vita/PS3  
ORIGIN: Japan  
PUBLISHER: Square Enix  
DEVELOPER: In-house, Vitos Games  
PRICE: £24.99  
RELEASE: Out now  
PLAYERS: 1  
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

do-over, the *Final Fantasy X HD* package almost feels like a brand new game. Almost.

Look closely enough, and you can see the seams holding everything together – the voice acting famously wasn't amazing in the game and that still stands, although now the vocals seem all the more dated and, frankly, embarrassing (the only believable and half-decent performance coming from Bender/Jake/Marcus Phoenix's John DiMaggio and his pseudo-Hawaiian Wakka). Now that you've

got the crisp HD sound output, you can hear that a lot of the characters – enthusiastically boyish Tidus, as an example – clearly don't understand the lines they've been given. It's a weakness that brings the whole experience down, and it's a shame, because just about everything else remains astonishing.

The remastered visuals hold up just as well on your 40-inch TV as they will on your Vita, and though the game doesn't come with a cross-buy option (boo, Square Enix), cross-save functionality is available, and is painless to use. Touchscreen features have been tacked onto the Vita version and become surprisingly intuitive after you've used them a few times. The remaster comes with the International version of the game (which we're used to in the PAL region, anyway) but also ships with a 14-minute bonus cutscene

THE REMASTER LOOKS BETTER  
THAN THE LOW-BUDGET RELEASES  
WE'VE PLAYED ON THE PS3, EVEN  
AT THE END OF ITS LIFESPAN



## FAQs

### Q. DOES IT REALLY LOOK THAT GOOD?

If you need any convincing, look up the water effects in the remastered version – if we saw them on PlayStation 2 we would have melted with glee.

### Q. DOES THE GAME PLAY HOLD UP?

FFX itself is still one of the deepest and most satisfying JRPGs we've played, with X-2 being a harmless bit of good fun.

### Q. SHOULDN'T I JUST BUY A NEWER FINAL FANTASY?

It really depends on what you're after – this will satisfy your retro itch while looking like new, but there are visible age lines if you're looking for them.



Left: The environments occasionally catch you off guard with how nice they look – almost seeming pre-rendered. This is a great nostalgic throwback to *Final Fantasy* games of the past.



Below: The monsters and summons retain their intricate designs, except this time round they're actually visible – we've found ourselves ogling the designs far more here, mainly because you can actually see them. The colours are more defined on the OLED screen, too.



set between *Final Fantasy X* and *X-2* and a couple of bonus 'audio episodes' that expand on the game's mythology.

If you didn't play the Expert Sphere Grid on your PS2 saves, make sure you do in the rerelease – it's game-changing; the ease with which you can let characters go on little trips into other party member's movesets is incredible (we had Yuna using second tier Black Magic by the time we were at Operation Mi'ihen). The inclusion of trophies also gives you something else to gun for this time around – dodging 200 bolts of lightning on the Thunder Plains will give you more than just a tired brain and half a Celestial Weapon when you play it now.

*Final Fantasy X-2* remains the same highly camp, off-the-wall pseudo-game it always was, feeling like a chimera of mini-games glued together

by the prototype of *XIII's* battle system. The game requires a separate download on the Vita if you buy the physical release of *X*, but comes on the same disk on PS3 – it's clear the first numbered *Final Fantasy* sequel was never the priority here. Still, the game looks just as stunning on the OLED Vita screen as *X* does, and the remastered music would probably be enough to bring us back anyway.

The Creature Creator and Last Mission modes are something we never got to see in the West, and the rerelease remedies that – there's a surprising amount of content in these modes too, bolstering the story and easily adding a good ten hours onto the gameplay. The creator Creator behaves similarly to the Monster Arena in *X*, and you can even recruit the likes of Tidus, Seymour or Auron to your team if you grind hard enough (weirdly, since that makes absolutely *no* canonical sense). Last Mission actually gives some closure to the whole *X/X-2* saga, too – being set three months after Vegnagun's defeat, the game

will alter depending on which ending you get in *X-2*. If you enjoyed the ambiguity of how the saga originally ended, you may want to stay away here – it's all dealt with quite explicitly.

■ *X-2* never had the strength of its predecessor, and felt like a collection of side-missions held together with a structure that felt slightly at odds with what *Final Fantasy* should be. Still, it was a brave experiment in game design and paved the way for the style that would later define the entire *FFXIII* series. This remastering throws in some extra dress spheres and grids, too – so if you enjoyed the battle system of the

## FINGERPRINT

### WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

**BLITZ OFF:** We'd happily pay the full price of a PSN game for the Blitzball mini-game itself – the most complete and engrossing side-quest of any *Final Fantasy* game to date.

game, there's even more to get your teeth into here.

Both games have seen their menus tidied up as well – they're far prettier to look at and have all been given a HD sheen, something

we really appreciate. The game actually got us excited for cutscenes again, too – the CGI is so impressively rendered that you would be forgiven for thinking the whole experience was originally made on the PS3. The way it's all been touched up actually makes the backgrounds look so detailed and vivid they look like they've been pre-rendered – similarly to the PlayStation *Final Fantasy* games (*post VII*), albeit with infinitely better character models and more seamless combinations between static environments and moving parts. The Remaster looks better than some of the low-budget releases we've played on the system, even at the end of its lifespan – we were initially suspicious that this was just a cynical cash-in by Square Enix, but seems that the studio really has sunk a lot of time into making this game a relevant experience, all over again.

## VERDICT 9/10

BOTH GAMES HAVE AGED GRACEFULLY, LIKE GOOD WINE

## TROPHY HUNTER

■ The inclusion of trophies in the Remaster will have completionists tapping away at their Vitas for the months to come – *Final Fantasy X* has always contained one of the most difficult *Final Fantasy* superbosses there ever was (read: Penance) and now there's a nice gold trophy available for beating it. *X-2* also carries a gold for completing the main game 100% – grabbing every item, all the time-sensitive missions and perfecting the coin-based mini-game. Still, with two platins for the price of one retail game, this package provides a decent challenge.



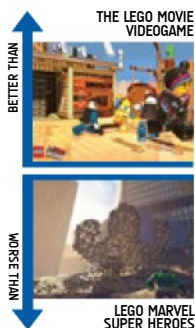


THERE AND BACK AGAIN

# Lego The Hobbit

## DETAILS

**FORMAT:** PlayStation 4  
**OTHER FORMATS:** Nintendo 3DS, PC, PlayStation 3, PS Vita, Wii U, Xbox 360, Xbox One  
**ORIGIN:** UK  
**PUBLISHER:** Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment  
**DEVELOPER:** TT Games  
**PRICE:** £49.99  
**RELEASE:** Out now  
**PLAYERS:** 1-2  
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A



Among the problems with Peter Jackson's adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's children's novel *The Hobbit* (and there sure are a lot) it's that he almost had to completely change the audience's perception of the dwarves that inhabited the cinematic fantasy world he established in *The Lord Of The Rings*. Portrayed with tempers as short as their stature, possessing little to no sense of humour and often the butt of many a joke, phrases such as 'Nobody tosses a dwarf' cemented the diminutive rock-bashers legacy as comedic foils. Then came the pathos. In *The Hobbit*, the band of dwarves all have solemn tales to be told, some harrowing backstory to paint these fearsome warriors as tortured souls seeking to reclaim their land and wealth from a greedy dragon. Spending hours upon hours in their company was an endeavour as exhausting as Mount Doom and almost entirely joyless. Perfect material for a *Lego* game!

*Lego The Hobbit's* biggest flaw then is how slavish it is to its source material. In the same vein as *Lego The Lord Of The Rings*, the game retells the story of the movie, lifting the original dialogue from the films for authenticity. This doesn't quite work as well in this instance, mainly because the script isn't quite as sharp as its predecessor's and the pacing is all over the place.

The first chapter is both heavy in exposition and gameplay mechanics. A lot of the features from *Lego: The Lord Of The Rings* return, such as the open world map and character radial, and then a few other elements poached from elsewhere – notably the construction mini-game found in *The Lego Movie Videogame*. But there's much more here besides that, balancing multiple playable characters that feature their own unique skills and weapons, while loot gathering and crafting offer further incentive to smash-up everything you possibly can in the hunt for further spoils.



**Above:** There's a whole heap of sidequests and secrets to be found in each new location, though most of the quests involve fetching or building items.

**Below:** When it has to go through the overwrought plot, you'll long for the days when *Lego* videogames had mute characters. That more farcical slapstick approach would have been better.







#### FAQ

##### Q. WILL I LIKE IT?

If you like the movies it's based on and enjoy other Lego games then there's no reason why not.

##### Q. WHERE'S THE LAST FILM?

This covers the first two, with the third rumoured to be added as DLC after the film is released later in the year.

##### Q. HOW OPEN IS IT?

Once you've progressed through each chapter you can walk back through the world and complete sidequests.

**Below:** The world of Middle-earth is impressive and TT games should be commended for packing in the iconography and condensing the landscape down so players can easily walk from one side of the map to the other.

## "ONE OF THE FIRST CHAPTERS IN THE GAME ESSENTIALLY INVOLVES MAKING DINNER FOR THE DWARVES"

It can seem a little overcomplicated at times for a younger audience, particularly in the segments where you'll have to use one dwarf to mine specific special items, before switching to another to hit a switch. Still, it does a better job of making each dwarf stand out than the movies considering its large cast, even if they're a less charismatic bunch compared to the Fellowship. It could be considered one of the more ambitious entries in the *Lego* gaming canon, its approach differing from its predecessors in that it often resembles a pre-school role-playing game. With loot and crafting such fundamental aspects of the game design, switching between various members of your party, it does an admirable job of balancing elements of the genre without coming across too overwhelming.

■ There's also a refreshing amount of variety in how a lot of these elements are executed through gameplay. It drops into rhythm-action for

certain tasks, such as crafting – and even features a completely interactive musical number – while quick-time events and co-op play a more key role. The game isn't short on ideas and often finds inventive twists on the simplistic design of its puzzles, without heavily recycling the same solutions. That said, with the expansion of features, characters and mechanics, some of the old *Lego* problems are exacerbated. The game remains fundamentally fiddly; with multiple actions mapped to a few buttons, simple commands become a brief struggle to execute and something as simple as character-switching should really have been

nailed down by this point in the franchise. TT Games still manages to make all its faults negligible, such is the series' inimitable charm that manages to be utterly addictive and treat its source with both reference and a keen eye for humour. It both satiates the appetite of young fans, while acting as a reminder to older gamers as to why they loved the source material in the first place.

And it's here, again, that *Lego The Hobbit* stumbles. Your enjoyment will largely be dictated by what you think of the first two films (rumours abound that the final film in the trilogy will be added as DLC), which have split critical consensus. Certainly, they're not quite as action packed and trundle along at a pace that makes *The Lord Of The Rings* look like *The Fast And The Furious*.

One of the first chapters in the game essentially involves making dinner for the dwarves in Hobbiton, wrecking Bilbo's pantry in order to find the right items to keep them fed. There's a loss of scale that makes each new chapter feel lacking, its

## MISSING LINK

### WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

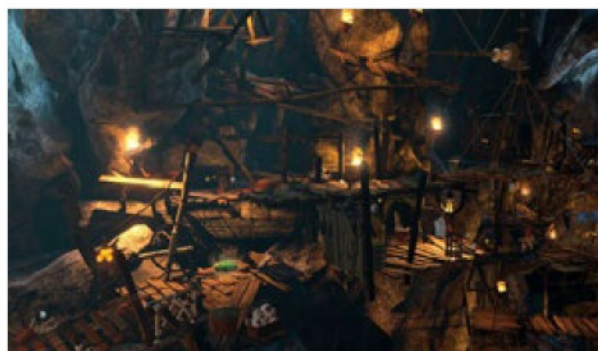
**LOSE THE VOICES:** It worked with *Lego: LOTR* due to its balance of humour and drama, but here mute *Lego* would provide more humour within the licence.

battles less spectacular than what has come before in other *Lego* games, its characters less engaging. Much like the film, there's a sense that content has been stretched, while new narrative has been crudely implemented to paper over the cracks.

This isn't TT's fault by any means, but it does make for a game that has to wrangle a sloppy a story, awkwardly transitioning from Ian Holm's older Bilbo as narrator, before those duties are passed onto Christopher Lee's Saruman for reasons that aren't entirely clear. It's not the best *Lego* game by any means, mostly due to the lacklustre licence at its core. However, *Lego The Hobbit* still demonstrates TT Games' willingness to experiment with the series' popular design and it makes some strides here to shake-up the formula in exciting new ways. If you love *The Hobbit* then you'll find the world absolutely crammed with things to do and see, but those that were disappointed by Jackson's second Middle-earth trilogy might not want to be reminded of the cinematic misfire.

**VERDICT** 6/10

A SOLID LEGO ADVENTURE TRAPPED IN A DISMAL PROPERTY



#### NEED A BUDDY?

■ In between collecting, smashing and having to endure some overwrought drama, the action in *Lego The Hobbit* mixes things up slightly compared to its predecessors. While you'll be doing the usual thing of smashing one button until all the bricks tumble into a pile of pieces, you'll be required to take on some of the game as a pair. Certain enemies and objects can only be defeated when you buddy up with another character. This requires finding another character nearby and pressing the button prompt to hold hands (kind of like how Bart and Lisa teamed up in *The Simpsons* arcade game) and you'll be able to deal greater damage to enemies with more devastating moves.



HIT THE DECKS

# Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft

## DETAILS

FORMAT: PC  
OTHER FORMATS: iOS, Android (TBC)  
ORIGIN: US  
PUBLISHER: Blizzard  
DEVELOPER: In-house  
PRICE: Free  
RELEASE: Out now  
PLAYERS: 1-2  
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

**Blizzard doesn't often move into new genres, but when it does two things tend to happen.** First, the popularity

curve of the imposed-upon genre suddenly goes from one that resembles rolling countryside to a steep vertiginous incline seemingly without end. Next, in a classic case of cause and effect, the Californian mega-developer quickly finds itself utterly dominating the competition. We saw the Blizzard Effect first manifest itself after the releases of *Warcraft* and *Starcraft*, then again with *World Of Warcraft* when Blizzard literally took MMO gaming by storm. Naturally it's happening once more: Barely a week from the launch of Blizzard's first collectable card game, *Hearthstone* was tracking as the ninth most popular game on PC, while its closest CCG rival was 244th – shuffling some way behind the *first Assassin's Creed*.

What Blizzard has done yet again is spotted a genre with the potential to be absurdly popular, assessed the competition as insular and moved in with a game that is supremely accessible. Let's be honest, collectable card games, digital or otherwise, aren't the easiest

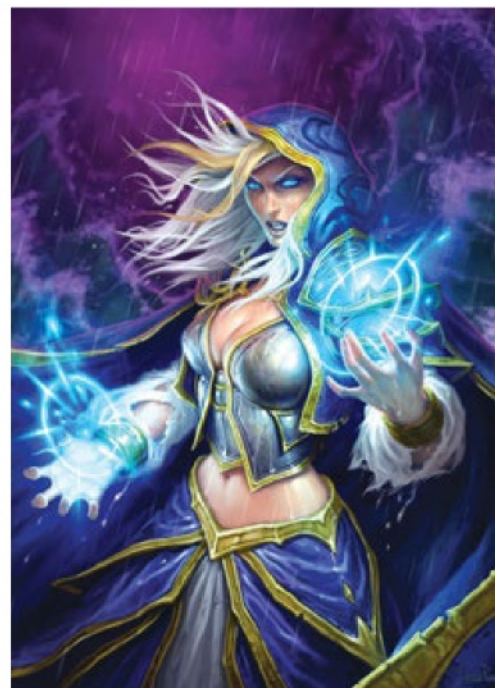
games to pick up. Quite apart from the play areas, discard piles and various other imaginary zones, there are cards that need to be collected, sorted, flipped, turned and always placed just so. The ultimate evolution of Chess and Top Trumps your typical card duel may be, but to the untrained eye it may as well be a fantasy spin on Numberwang, only played with scraps of virtual paper.

*Hearthstone* largely succeeds by doing away with the faff. The play area is a single row for each player, an offensive/defensive line populated with summoned minions and augmented by one-off spell cards that will boost health, increase damage, or have the reverse effect on the opposition. Behind this line sits each player's hero character, each one with a special ability, a unique selection of cards that can be assembled beforehand and a number of health points that need to be picked off for the other player to win.

While games start slowly, each player's stock of Mana points increases with every turn, meaning that more powerful cards can be played as the match progresses. Far from



**Above:** Summoned minions are key, for they are both your main means of attack and defence. Play the right support card however and fortunes can flip in an instant.



**Left:** There are 350-odd cards for the player to collect, with more to come – likely through paid-for expansions.





## GIRD YOUR COINS

■ Being a free-to-play game, we were initially sceptical of Blizzard's choice of revenue hoarding, but it's hard to spot a flaw in the logic. The appeal of a collectable card game is in throwing down money to get the basic decks and working to expand them by investing in booster packs. Here not only are the starter decks easily unlocked within the first couple of hours, it's possible to unlock every card you'll need purely during the process of playing the game. Naturally there's an element of grind that can be offset by pitching in a few dollars, but there really is no need to invest more than your time until you've mastered a good deal of the cards already – by which point you may find yourself buying cards more as a gesture than out of necessity. Perhaps we'll revise our view once Blizzard announces expansions, but for now *Hearthstone* is a F2P triumph.



being less tactical than the likes of Mojang's *Scrolls* or *Duel Of Champions*, this means games are over in a matter of minutes. But instead of feeling flimsy, the speed of thought the game requires has it feeling more like an action game, with you able to line up cards while your opponent is still thinking through the consequences of their next move. It's as frenetic as a card game can possibly be, thanks to the many graphical sweeps and flourishes that enhance the gameboard, yet without many of the compromises that usually come with simplicity of design.

While a case could be made for *Hearthstone*'s obvious lack of complexity in comparison to other CCGs, to criticise it for not being closer to the games it's designed to stand out from rather misses the point. Likewise, you can hardly berate the game's reliance on random numbers when the luck of the draw is part of the DNA of collectable card gaming. Less fundamental are a lack of gameplay modes, for while there are perfectly serviceable practice modes and a poised matchmaking system behind the game's bread-and-butter ranked play, beyond the pay-to-access Arena mode the game is currently very light on tournament options. That's not to suggest Arena doesn't offer a markedly different challenge. Whereas the other modes focus around collecting cards

## FAQs

### Q. WHAT'S THE TABLET VERSION LIKE?

Fundamentally it's the same, or rather the iPad version is. The Android edition is still being worked on.

### Q. ARE THE TWO PLATFORMS CONNECTED?

Yes, you can be at your desk playing against a rich person who's relaxing by the pool with their 128GB Silver iPad Air.

### Q. DOES IT REQUIRE A SEPARATE ACCOUNT?

Games are played through the Battle.net service, so you can switch systems and keep your carefully arranged card collection.

and experience points and tinkering with decks, Arena tournaments, which require gold to enter (which can be bought or earned through daily quest completion) require you to make the best of what you're given: Choosing one of the game's nine heroes, players go through the process of selecting the best card out of three until they have their 30-card deck. They are then thrown into a succession of matches until either three are lost or 12 won.

The rewards for an Arena champion are significant. One is Arcane Dust, a resource that's also a by-product of deconstructing cards you don't need. There is no card trading in the game, but with a pile of *Warcraft*'s magic powder it's possible to create any specific card you think necessary to complete the perfect card stack. It's an intriguing and perfectly acceptable system, no doubt implemented to circumvent third-party trading, but as a result it does feel that a fundamental part of the CCG experience is missing, even if it's one that rarely benefits the majority. On balance we should be grateful, given how Blizzard has avoided many other unpleasantities sometimes associated with some of the more 'grass roots' CCG competitions.

■ As light as it may be in some areas – and probably lacking in depth for the CCG grognards – *Hearthstone* is actually an incredibly generous game, almost to a fault. While most other free-to-play games hook you in with promises that you'll never need to pay before suggesting that really you do, there's virtually nothing in *Hearthstone* that requires gold to unlock. Quite the opposite,

you may find buying new cards before you've mastered the ones that you already have likely to set you back more than just shekles.

All of which makes us a little suspicious.

Are we being suckered with the sweet stuff now, only to be hit with expensive expansions later? Perhaps, but we'll revise our view if and when Blizzard introduces the CCG equivalent of *WoW*'s 'Sparkle Pony'. For now, *Hearthstone* is very much a triumph, and with a mobile client rolling out there's a sense that we're at the beginning of a phenomenon rather than in the midst of one. Yet again, Blizzard seems to have played its cards absolutely right.

## FINGERPRINT

### WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

**SPENDING PENNIES:** *Hearthstone* isn't just free-to-play done right, the normally hateful practice of revenue generation has been implemented in such a way that you can barely imagine the game succeeding any other way.



## VERDICT 8/10

THE CASUAL FREE-TO-PLAY GAME IT'S OKAY TO LIKE



PASS AND MOVE, OR JUST PASS?

# Kinect Sports Rivals

Despite the Xbox One's Kinect-powered omniscience, it's easy to forget the thing's actually there. Now it no longer bows at you in that menacingly mechanical fashion, the chunky camera feels almost inert. Only when you boot up a game like *Kinect Sports Rivals* do you remember that you're being watched at all times, even in the dark, and that you should probably be a little more wary of that than you are.

Rare's latest endeavour to remind the world the camera still exists crams six sports into a festival of saccharine chart-pop, grating characters and gorgeous visuals, and uses Kinect to power the whole charade. After an extravagant introduction where your likeness is literally scanned into the system (see Character Building), you're whisked off to a South Pacific-style island and yelled at by someone called Coach until you learn how to play Wake Racing, Climbing, Shooting, Bowling, Football and Tennis.

The insistence of cramming story and character into *Kinect Sports Rivals* is unquestionably a mistake – a galling mix of weak stereotypes, grating dialogue and unskippable cutscenes just getting in the way of the action. Thankfully, after battling through an extremely long training section, the game opens up and allows you to enjoy any of its events with friends, or continue the single-player 'campaign' in order to level up.

After you've endured the cinematic sequences, it's time to find out just how these games play. First important notice then – Kinect still requires an inordinate amount of space to function correctly. It's not as drastic as with its previous incarnation, but a 6'1 man playing a good nine feet away from the camera was still not far enough away for the camera to be able to see both feet and outstretched arms. And you'll need width too, so it's probably time to move the furniture.

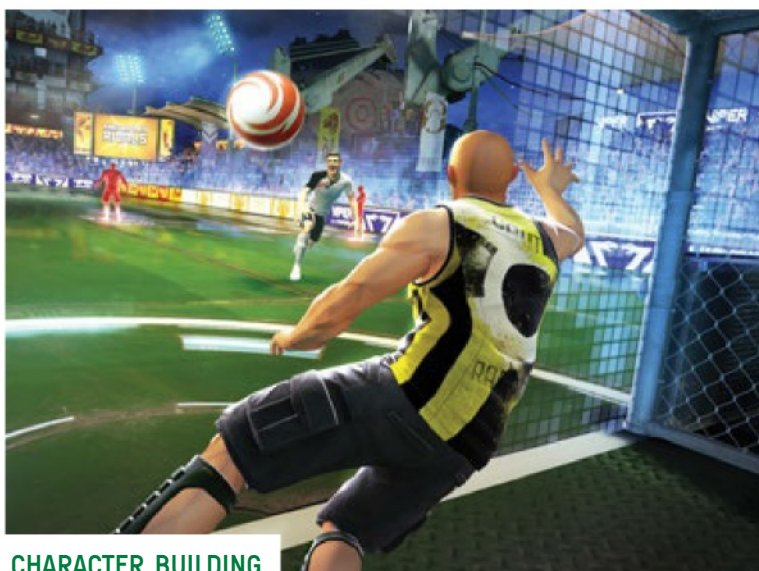
If you do get the thing working, its reliability ranges from inconsistent to excellent, depending on the mode. Wake Racing, easily the most visually impressive event, works almost flawlessly. Here, you stand with arms outstretched, closing the right hand to accelerate and steering by

## DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One  
OTHER FORMATS: N/A  
ORIGIN: UK  
PUBLISHER: Microsoft  
DEVELOPER: Rare  
PRICE: £49.99  
RELEASE: Out now  
PLAYERS: 1-4  
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

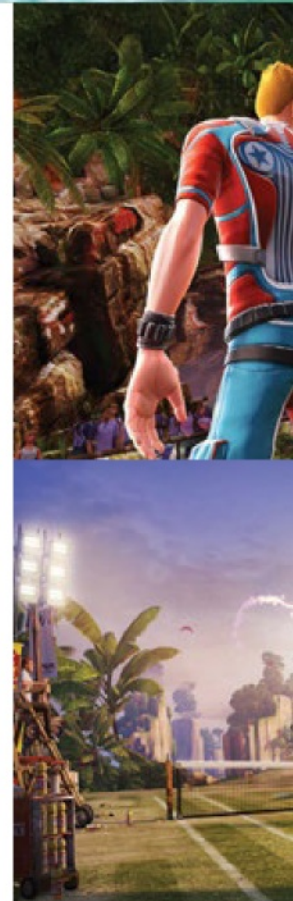


**Above:** There's no denying the game's prettiness. Wake Racing in particular is stunning, with gorgeous water effects and beautiful lighting. The game is bright and beautiful throughout, and looks every bit 'next-gen'. **Right:** If you happen to live in a church hall, *Kinect Sports Rivals* is a far better prospect. Those in small urban flats may not be able to play it at all.



## CHARACTER BUILDING

Probably the most impressive aspect of *Kinect Sports Rivals* happens before you even fling yourself into one of its mini-games. Before any of the frivolity can occur, David Tennant of all people demands that you're scanned into the game and turned into a digital avatar, in a process that takes around three minutes. It's actually quite exciting, watching as a bunch of squares takes shape and forms a reasonably impressive approximation of yourself (albeit in lean, stylised form), and is one of the best proof-of-concepts for Kinect so far. And of course, that champion becomes your 'drivatar', effectively, out in the online world for friends to battle independently as they play through the game.







### FAQs

#### Q. HOW MANY SPORTS?

Six in total.

#### Q. WHAT'S THE BEST?

Bowling is functionally enjoyable, but climbing and wake-racing are the most impressive.

#### Q. AND THE WORST?

Football is irritating, and shooting is tedious.

moving your hands backwards and forwards (as you would steer a bike). The water effects are stunning, and much of the fun comes from navigating the cascading waves as you point your jetski through giant green rings.

■ *Rivals* isn't too keen on realism, so there are mines to dodge and power ups to (voice) activate as you careen around the course. It's a great introduction to the game. Following on from there is Climbing, another strong entrant, which asks you to reach for handholds and then pull your hands towards your waist to propel your character up a giant wall.

This event does a good job in showing off Kinect's hand-tracking accuracy, and when you get into a flow it's strangely hypnotic. Occasionally it does fall apart; your climber can get stuck flailing for a grip and it's hard to get him or her to move to the necessary spot. But with the ability to grab the ankles of competitors, and interesting hazards like crumbling grips and electrified fences, it's a good laugh in split-screen multiplayer.

## CONNECTED

### EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

**CLOUD STRIFE:** Your scanned-in Champion is uploaded to the cloud for it to battle your friends on their own consoles.

Then, sadly, the excitement begins to wane. Shooting is essentially a pointing simulator – a light-gun game without the gun. You point your arm at targets, and the gun shoots automatically. It works, but it's hardly the most enthralling of modes. This one's played

in one-on-one, with an opponent on the other side of a force field trying to shoot targets quicker than you. There's limited interaction – you can activate a turret which your opponent must literally move their body to avoid – but that's it.

Football comes next, a curious combination of foosball and penalties. Essentially, you pass the ball to a teleporting version of yourself as you progress up the pitch, trying to avoid kicking it to lifeless opponents, before passing it to your striker (still yourself, weirdly). The game then slows down and you have a chance to volley or head it into the net. The accuracy is poor, struggling to read angle or power, and any attempt to use actual football technique results in random on-screen reactions.

Tennis is much of the same, asking you to adopt a rather odd swinging technique and

## KINECT STILL REQUIRES AN INORDINATE AMOUNT OF SPACE TO FUNCTION CORRECTLY



**Above:** Local multiplayer offers split-screen for two players, which works well on all modes, providing you have the appropriate width to play. Bowling lets you play with three others in traditional frame-by-frame action. **Left:** As well as playing with your Champion, you can start a Quick Match on any sport using the awful characters Rare uses in *Rivals*' dreadful story.

off timing in order to ping the ball back and forth across the net. As pretty as it is, it's not as enjoyable as *Wii Tennis* in any of its forms.

Finally we have bowling, which works exactly as you'd expect, but lacks the tactile feedback you find in *Wii Sports Bowling* and demands over-exaggerated motions to make the ball spin. It's fine, but no better than the equivalent in the original *Kinect Sports*.

The whole package is very stylishly put together, and built around the fact your 'champion' is uploaded to the cloud where your friends can compete against them asynchronously. Despite its polish, though, the events aren't as engaging as those found in *Wii Sports*, and the technology powering them is still frustratingly inaccurate, or demands you move your body in awkward ways.

As a pack-in for the console, this would have been far easier to forgive, but at full price and with no proper multiplayer, it's a tough sell. Rare's game looks stunning and is enjoyably tame, but lacks in true winner's grit and star quality. Maybe next season.

**VERDICT 6/10**

REASONABLY ENTERTAINING, BUT KINECT HAS A LOT TO PROVE



YOUR RISE TO POWER BEGINS

# Age Of Wonders III

## DETAILS

FORMAT: PC  
 ORIGIN: Netherlands  
 PUBLISHER: Triumph Studios  
 DEVELOPER: In-house  
 PRICE: £29.99  
 RELEASE: Out now  
 PLAYERS: 1-8  
 MINIMUM SPEC: 2.4 GHz CPU, 512MB GPU, 2GB RAM, 10GB HDD space  
 ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

**Below:** There isn't that much in the way of variety when it comes to different terrain arenas, but the different enemies you encounter will mix up your strategies all the same – so it never really feels like a problem.

**When it comes to 4X – the crudely conceived title for games that pit you with the consistent management of a nation to ultimately reign supreme – it's not like you're drowning in options.**

If you're partial to a spot of *Civilization* (whichever version it is you've deemed superlative enough to haul a triple-figure number of hours into) then, often, you can feel a little bereft of choice. Firaxis remains the master, of course, but as PC gaming becomes increasingly assorted, genres such as 4X can begin to thrive once again. *Age Of Wonders III* would not have happened had PC gaming not evolved into such a suitable environment for traditionally niche games, but here we are. And we're rather glad.

Though comparative cornerstones often don't do a game justice, it's first worth pointing out that, though it may share some similarities with the *Heroes Of Might And Magic* of the world, *Age Of Wonders III* is actually far more akin to *Civilization* than Ubisoft's equivalent. Though the conceit isn't quite as grand, the principal mechanics do feel largely familiar. You'll begin with a settler, from which you'll

found a suitable starting city and expand out, meeting new factions, likely squishing them beneath your boot and gradually growing in power to become de facto ruling nation. So far, so 4X.

In fact perhaps the biggest criticism of *Age Of Wonders III* is simply that it doesn't do much to mix up this formula at all. It's a widely reputed strategy series and to anyone interested in the genre it will likely be an anticipated game, but there aren't many changes here (good or bad) to really warrant such excitement. Perhaps it's enough to return to the series after so long – and there is merit in that – but by and large there isn't much, besides the visual upgrades, to distinguish this from its earlier releases.

Accessibility is perhaps the biggest selling point, but don't worry – there's no negative connotation of the word here. Much like *Civilization V* before it, *Age Of Wonders III* has streamlined a large portion of the game's gradual progression to make it feel more consistent. You have to consider if this was in a bid to focus a little more on multiplayer or not, but overall the game does feel all

**Right:** The problem with city management is that no one city has an obvious advantage. Specifically tooling cities for production, gold, research or just happiness isn't really something you need to consider – just picking a unit you want to be able to produce next seems to be the crux of it.

**Below:** This is a small thing, but it's a neat little touch. Scroll out enough and the overworld screen transforms into a fantasy map, replete with icons for important locations.



**Below:** Like *Heroes Of Might And Magic*, underlying RPG mechanics mean it's important to explore your domain before your enemy can.



**Above:** Grand battles take place at cities, often with fortifications for the defender. Global spells can turn the tides somewhat, but mostly you'll need to use your wits if you hope to survive the onslaught.





## STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Multiplayer is clearly a big focus for *Age Of Wonders III*, with an obvious attention to ensuring no one player would have an advantage over others. It does mean there's not quite as much difference between races and classes as it feels like there should be, but hopefully it'll mean there will be added longevity in the lifespan of the game and its community. An imbalanced game in this kind of genre can be a hell of a lot of fun, but ultimately, you don't want to know who will win as soon as you see who's involved. As always, the level editor has been included so it'll be possible to create and share your own maps and scenarios with other players too – a nice little extra that so few developers think to provide these days.



the better for it. And it's clear that a large inspiration for these improvements is *Civilization V*, with many of *Age Of Wonders III*'s underlying systems brought to the surface in a very similar way. Event-log tooltips, building construction being more progression-based and even overworld icons that represent the particular income you're receiving from a nearby resource all bear the hallmarks of *Civ V*.

However, as sad as it is to say, the city management does not compare to *Civilization's* and it remains *Age Of Wonders'* weakest area. Where *Civilization* as a series has often presented you with myriad important options when it comes to which structure to build next, the lack of reliance on resources in AOE – at least in a strategic sense – means there's little reason to put too much thought into what your next choice should be, especially for those safer cities located away from the main focus of a war.

It's in the combat that *Age Of Wonders III* excels, however. Again it is more of a refinement of what has come before, but it is compelling all the same. Battles take place on terrain-based arenas, with a familiar hex-based grid taking up the core strategy – placement of units and getting that advantage is key here, and the AI is

## FAQS

### Q. WHAT'S THE CAMPAIGN LIKE?

Mostly a series of large-ish maps with scripted events. There is a story to tell here with decent voice acting, but not enough to care about.

### Q. HOW ABOUT SCENARIOS?

There are only eight scenario maps to play initially, but with an included map editor there's no reason why you can't make your own.

### Q. RANDOM MAPS?

It's here that most people will want to spend their time, providing that same *Civilization*-esque one-more-turn compulsion.

particularly adept at picking holes in your flanks. During the campaign sheer wealth of numbers will usually be enough to see you through to the end of each stage, but randomised maps, scenarios and even multiplayer games will require a little more precaution, planning and precognition.

Though each race comes with their own equivalent across the core unit types – infantry, archer, cavalry, and so on – they all play mostly the same. Some races might deal lightning damage instead of blight (poison), but mechanically they feel no different. This is in aid of balancing, however, to ensure that no one particular race or class has an unfair advantage over another. Instead Irregulars and a bevy of grander units – the Tier IV units, basically – provide the personality to an army, and it's here that you'll make or break your strategy by playing off against the opposing force's own large-scale war-monsters.

*Age Of Wonders III*'s longevity depends significantly on what exactly you want to get out of it. Though the actual tale that the campaign missions have to tell is mostly forgettable, they do still provide a good

number of hours of content for you to wade through – even if it is mostly a long-form tutorial on each of the different races and classes. But then there are just as many hours in the randomised maps – whether you choose to play multiplayer or not – and it's here where the finely tuned balancing is more noticeable. At this point you are up against thinking opponents, and they won't

always wait around for you to build your forces. This results in a necessary reliance on the outcome of battles at a tactical level, rather than waiting a handful of turns to pump out

## ENHANCED

### IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

**WONDEROUS:** It's enough that this is a fine-tuning of what has come before, making it the standout *Age Of Wonders* game and a strategy title that's very much worth your time.

Golden Dragons.

So while *Age Of Wonders III* doesn't really offer much that you can't get elsewhere from the 4X genre, it feels fresh and distinctive enough – it has been over a decade since the last *Age Of Wonders*, after all – that strategy fans will have something to get their teeth into all the same. Hopefully next time won't be quite so far away, and a little more consideration for the city management screen wouldn't go amiss.

**VERDICT 8/10**

AN OUTSTANDING REFINEMENT OF WHAT HAS BEEN BEFORE



UPGRADE YOUR RAM

# Goat Simulator

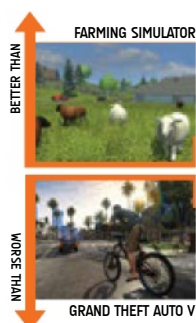


Inspired by the baffling popularity and propagation of bargain bin simulators, *Goat Simulator* is a joke from the inside out, lifting its title from *Euro Truck Simulator*, *Airport Firefighter Simulator*, *Ski Region Simulator* and a litany of other woeful budget releases that really do exist. But rather than bog players down in the daily monotony of munching grass and getting caught in fences, your caprine avatar is a relentlessly sociopathic beast sprung straight from the flames of hell.

You're dropped into a small sandbox and you're set free to trot around and wreak whatever havoc you see fit to the environment and the scattering of civilians that reside in the area. There's not a lot else to it, armed with a limited array of abilities that include running, ramming and licking (your tongue acts as a particularly effective adhesive that can drag objects and people around) to facilitate whatever nefarious deed you may have planned. You also have a button to bleat, obviously.

## DETAILS

FORMAT: PC  
ORIGIN: Sweden  
PUBLISHER: Coffee Stain Studios  
DEVELOPER: In-house  
PRICE: £6.99  
RELEASE: Out now  
PLAYERS: 1  
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: The game makes no secret of the fact that it's absolutely plagued with bugs. In fact, it more or less celebrates it, with some of the funniest moments of gameplay coming as a result of some weird glitch.



Above: You can actually string together some pretty impressive score streaks if you're inventive enough in your approach to the world around you. Usually these involve your goat flying through the air in hilarious fashion.

You get points for causing destruction, a multiplier keeping track of your score, enabling you to study the exact value of making a petrol station explode by headbutting it – sending your fearless goat cartwheeling across the heavens. It's all hilarious nonsense, a mixture of outlandish physics and primed gags waiting to be provoked into revealing their punchline.

*Goat Simulator* is inelegant, plagued by bugs and is constrained in its design, making it easy enough to slate it as a (albeit it often amusing)

physics demo featuring an intentionally peculiar player character. But it's the fundamental set-up that proves to be both the least interesting and least enjoyable aspect of *Goat Simulator*. It doesn't take long to discover all of its trinkets and secrets, but finding the UFO, or the uncontrollable jetpack, or even

the slightly disturbing demonic altar energises what could easily have been written off as a one-note endeavour. That's not to say that *Goat Simulator* has an overabundance of depth, but it does have an inimitable charm and joyously infectious sense of humour that almost makes up for its lack of technical polish or overarching focus. At this point there's only

## FINGERPRINT

### WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

**HOT GOAT ACTION:** How many games let you play as a demonic goat that can blow up a car by headbutting it? We're willing to bet just one. It's this one, if you didn't follow that.

an afternoon's worth of content available but it's already captured the imagination of the community, suggesting that there will almost

certainly be much more to get out of it in the coming months. It might have started off as a joke, but the funny thing about *Goat Simulator* is that it's a much better game than it has any right to be.

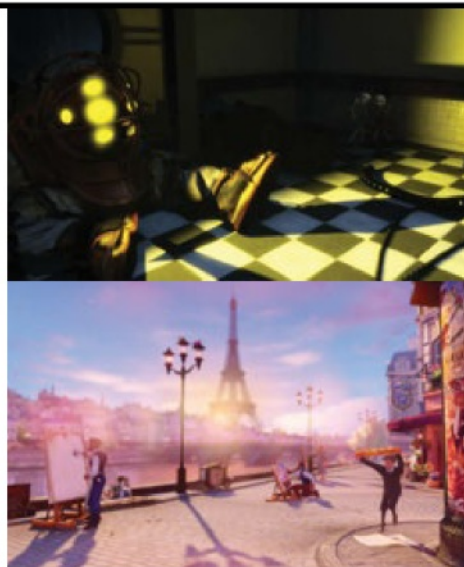
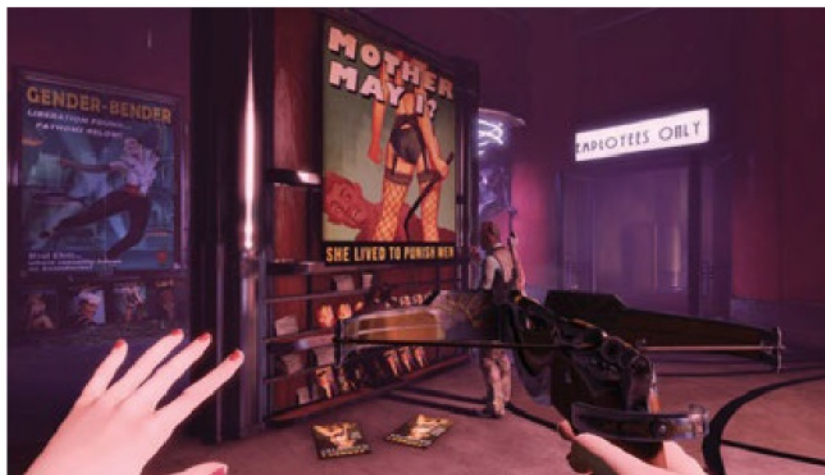
**VERDICT 6/10**

THE BLEATING HEART OF THE SIMULATOR GENRE





Below: There's a neat selection of guns available, despite the fact the game tries to deter you from taking a violent approach to the gameplay. One particular weapon emits waves that eventually cause enemies to explode.



## MURDER SHE WROTE

# BioShock Infinite: Burial At Sea Episode 2

Now that the novelty of Rapture's return has been dealt with, *BioShock Infinite's* second slice of subaquatic DLC has greater intent on exploring new gameplay opportunities without compromising the complexity of the mythology.

Stepping into the (noisy) high-heeled shoes of Elizabeth, events pick up moments after the conclusion of the first episode, Elizabeth lifting the mantle from Booker as the new gun-slinging, plasmid-wielding protagonist. Thankfully, Irrational has avoided repurposing mechanics, painting the cuticles with some nail polish and branding it a new experience; Elizabeth's approach to combat and navigation through Rapture is skilfully considered. *BioShock* has always been about soaking in the environment and tracing around the edges to discover its secrets. Surprisingly, the second part of *Burial At Sea* appreciates this design better than any *BioShock* release to date.

### DETAILS

FORMAT: PC  
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360  
ORIGIN: US  
PUBLISHER: 2K Games  
DEVELOPER: Irrational Entertainment  
PRICE: £11.99  
RELEASE: Out now  
PLAYERS: 1  
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BIOSHOCK INFINITE:  
BURIAL AT SEA  
- EPISODE 1



The introduction of stealth mechanics in *Episode 2* refreshes the formula and forces you to spend much more time poking around every darkened corner of the haunted cityscape. It also pays homage to Levine's previous work – particularly in its 1998 Mode – with *Thief: The Dark Project*, a conceptual touchstone that impacted the tone of *Infinite's* finale. Broken glass, carpeted flooring and leaking water pipes are all potential hazards that can alert enemies, while Elizabeth's book smarts enable her to effectively pick locks and delve further into the depths of Rapture. There's also a couple of new Plasmids, with the primary addition, Peeping Tom, bolstering the furtive gameplay mechanics, endowing Elizabeth with the ability to briefly turn invisible and see through walls.

## FINGERPRINT

### WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

**NEW SHOES:** Playing as Elizabeth sets the same apart from previous *Infinite* chapters, with the action slowed down and stealth taking precedence over the familiar gunplay of its predecessors.

If there's a complaint to be had then it's that too much of a concession has been made to a more general audience. After all, *BioShock Infinite* geared itself around action-packed set-pieces and, while the stealth mechanics are strong,

the scenarios haven't been built to effectively utilise them – enemies are far too easy to outwit or subdue. Higher difficulty settings scale the challenge,

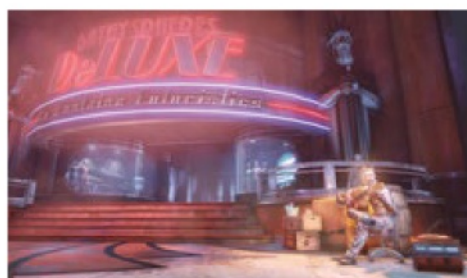
but the average player will find *Burial At Sea* more concerned with telling its story than engaging fully with its gameplay.

It's fair to say the narrative is the main draw for the majority of returning players and in that regard it doesn't disappoint. Without divulging specifics, it all goes a bit *Lost Season 6*, as timey-wimey existential pondering trumps characterisation, but the appealing characters are enough to ground proceedings.

If this is to be Irrational's last hurrah then it's a mixed but compelling swansong for a company that often took bold, divisive design and narrative avenues. It might not hit the highs of its best work, but it's a fitting testament to the studio's unbridled creativity and theatrical magnificence.

VERDICT **7/10**

MORE STORY THAN GAMEPLAY, IT'S A FITTING FAREWELL



JUST WHAT YOU SOW

# Diablo III: Reaper Of Souls

## DETAILS

FORMAT: PC  
 ORIGIN: US  
 PUBLISHER: Blizzard Entertainment  
 DEVELOPER: In-house  
 PRICE: £32.99  
 RELEASE: Out now  
 PLAYERS: 1-4  
 MINIMUM SPEC: X2.8 GHZ CPU, 512MB GPU, 1GB RAM, 12GB HDD SPACE, WINDOWS XP/MAC  
 ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

**Below:** There's an increase in environmental hazards with *Reaper Of Souls* that makes surviving tough battles all the tougher. It's a neat little touch that likely will go by completely unappreciated by most.

**'Too little too late' is not a phrase developers ever want to hear when releasing a sequel, expansion pack or even a patch that aims to fix inherent problems once rife within the original.** To claim that Blizzard had a disaster of a launch for *Diablo III* would be taking the edge off it somewhat; *Diablo III*'s launch couldn't have gone much worse. In between Error 37 – which kind of proved an always-online single-player game was completely the wrong way to go – and a series of gameplay changes that diehard fans didn't ask for and certainly didn't want, Blizzard probably couldn't have had a more ruinous launch for their biggest game since *World Of Warcraft*. So the good news is that, if you were one of the many outraged demanding Blizzard to refund your money back, it might not actually be too late with *Diablo III: Reaper Of Souls*. It may, however, be too little.

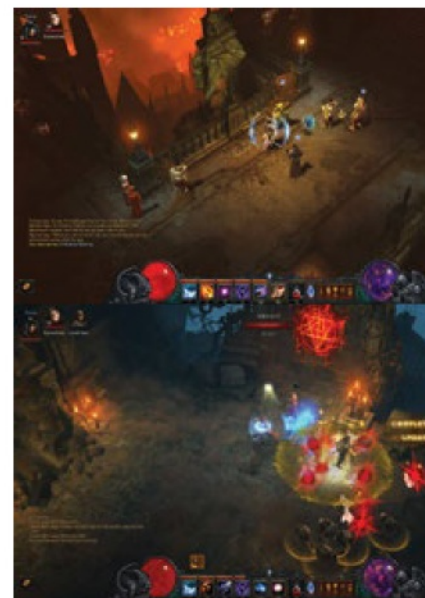
■ The crux of the expansion pack here is Act V, a fully realised whole new campaign section to right-click your way through that picks up shortly after the end of *Diablo III*

(spoiler: Diablo is defeated). As you might expect from such an appendage, the tricky part is for Blizzard to make this brand new fifth Act feel just as compelling and important as the entirety of the original four Acts. We won't spoil it, of course, but suffice to say Blizzard has once again maintained that eerie magic it manages so well with the rich worlds it creates. There is danger, there is threat and there is mystery. Whether or not you appreciated *Diablo III*'s hand-crafted campaign – as opposed to traditionally randomised worlds – it's impossible to overstate just how well Blizzard has managed to tie in what would be an 'addition to' and not 'completion of' *Diablo III*. There's even a little bit of special closure for those that are drawn into *Diablo*'s lore.

It helps that brand new environments, locations and enemies are added into the campaign, and even the welcome return of Abd al-Hazir as many of the new beasts are encountered. *Diablo III* just wouldn't be the same without his chirpy tones covering the sounds of gruesome battle. Admittedly some of these new creatures are, in essence,

**Right:** The new Mystic-character – besides adding a spot of humour – can be used to alter some of the enchantments on your weapon. It's a hit-and-miss system with a high price, but a brilliant extra to make that good item great.

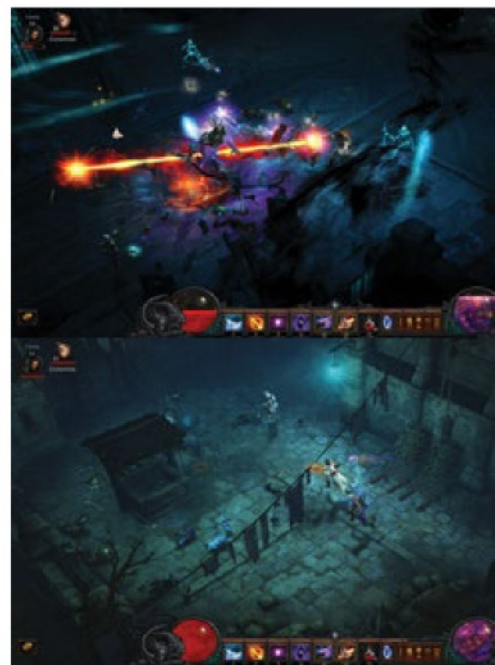
**Below:** NPCs such as Tyrael, Haedrig and Shen all return – with new dialogue options particular to Act V. Even your accompanying follower will have new conversation options.



**Below:** You won't be able to access Act V unless you have at least one character who has finished the game. Which makes sense, really.



**“THIS IS A SUPERLATIVE EFFORT FROM BLIZZARD, BUT IS IT ENOUGH?”**



**Above:** Some of the locations you visit are particularly exciting for *Diablo* fans, and the attention to detail is as great as ever.





## PATCH NOTES

❏ If it's been a while since you patched *Diablo III* then it's also worth pointing out some of the features you'll get as part of the *Reaper Of Souls* patch – regardless of whether you buy the expansion pack or not. First off, the Auction House is now completely gone. It was something of a risky move on Blizzard's part to include it in the first place, but it seems like Blizzard has now accepted that the risk just hasn't paid off. Then there's a new item drop system – dubbed Loot 2.0 – that attempts to tailor equipment being dropped for the class that you're playing. You should end up finding much more relevant gear with Loot 2.0 than you would have done previously, which should make the grind for legendary gear a little more bearable.



reskins of those we've seen in the original campaign, but there's enough fresh to see here that it would be unfair to criticise such a minor fault. In terms of content there's a good solid few hours here in the fifth Act alone, and that's if you rush through; take your time to explore, empty every ginnel and complete every event and you'll perhaps find it'll take between eight to ten hours to complete. It's at that point you'll unlock Adventure Mode, where diehard fans might feel a little more at home.

❏ Rather than take on the five Acts in order again, Adventure Mode instead sends you across the map on random bounties, taking out tricky beasts, exploring wastes and generally adventuring your way to success. It's kind of in the name, really. It's a handy addition for those who don't want to have to fight through the game in a linear fashion once it's completed, and mixes it up enough that if you are interested in the end-game of grinding for those legendaries you won't feel that same fatigue set in. Of course the real benefit is the Nephalem Rifts, which can be created after completing bounties and earning the necessary key. These randomised dungeons might not sound like much, but there are benefits that should appeal to the hardcore *Diablo* fans.

## FAQS

### Q. IS IT HARD?

Obviously it depends on the difficulty you choose to play on, but there are a number of tough fights to be had.

### Q. BOSSES?

There are three 'main' bosses to defeat, but they're fairly easy. It's in the otherwise innocuous battles that the real challenge arises.

### Q. NPCs?

A lot of previous NPCs will remain here – all with the same voice actors, too – and it's nice to hear them discussing Act V's plot points.

By piecing together tilesets from across the entire *Diablo III* palette and pairing it with unexpected – and often challenging – monster types, there's plenty of randomness to the expansion pack. It is worth mentioning that loot isn't modified in any particular way within Nephalem Rifts – it falls under the same mechanical rules as the campaign – but all the same it provides that added longevity that you probably wouldn't have had otherwise. It's a fantastic option for those methodical looters, and a much needed feature that fans would be clamouring for.

Then there's the Crusader class, a new melee warrior that utilises the power of the light. Other existing classes get a handful of new passives and the odd new ability, but it's in the new Crusader where the real development has gone. You'll need to start from scratch here – which makes Adventure Mode particularly useful – but the new class does make for an enjoyable addition to round off the package. The abilities don't mix things up too much, but there are a few interesting – and very powerful – ones in there that will, if nothing else, be fun to experience at least

once. Whether or not the class will be of any use to you will rely quite heavily on your love of *Diablo*'s persistent grind, which is the same as it ever has been.

And really that's where the value of *Diablo III: Reaper Of Souls* comes from. To call it the game *Diablo III* should've been is perhaps a little unfair – though yes, the random elements have been a long time coming – but it is a tough expansion pack to gauge. This is a high-price for the content, though objectively there are mechanisms and features that could ensure you get the

required longevity out of the expansion pack. But subjectively it boils down to just how much use you will find yourself getting out of these new additions. The Crusader requires a reroll, bounties reuse locations and the addition of randomised dungeons might genuinely be a case of too little, too late. This is a superlative effort from Blizzard, but is it enough to change your mind if you've already decided against the instalment? Sadly, that's not a question we can answer for you.

## VERDICT 8/10

BLIZZARD QUALITY CONTENT AT A BLIZZARD STANDARD PRICE.





Left: *Tales Of Symphonia: Dawn Of The New World's* Marta can be an annoying character, but the whiny Emil really takes the biscuit. *Tales Of Symphonia's* characters may be a little shallow, but they're at least bearable.

## THE RONSEAL OF JRPGS

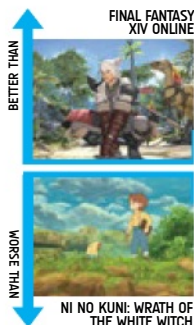
# Tales Of Symphonia Chronicles

Let's be honest. No one is salaciously eyeing up *Tales Of Symphonia Chronicles* because they're desperate to have a second crack at *Tales Of Symphonia's* moderately received sequel, *Dawn Of The New World*. No, it is the HD remake of the original *Tales Of Symphonia* that is the jewel in the crown of this remastered double pack. What *Chronicles* offers is an opportunity for fans of *Tales Of Symphonia* to return to a world they remember fondly, or, a chance for JRPG fans that may have missed the game first time around to see what the fuss is about. The success of *Chronicles* is largely dependent on which of those groups you belong to.

For players who already know *Tales Of Symphonia*, there's very little to criticise. *Chronicles* is a slightly graphically sharper version of the original *Tales Of Symphonia* game and in that sense, *Chronicles* does exactly what it says on the tin. *Tales Of Symphonia* is by no means a perfect game but if you've played the original, you

### DETAILS

FORMAT: Playstation 3  
 ORIGIN: Japan  
 PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco  
 DEVELOPER: In-house  
 PRICE: £29.99  
 RELEASE: Out now  
 PLAYERS: 1-4  
 ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



already know that or disagree. In either case, *Chronicles* provides the opportunity for players to have another pop at *Tales* on the PS3 and throws the weaker *Dawn Of The New World* in as a welcome, if unspectacular, addition to the package.

If you're not familiar with the *Tales Of Symphonia* series, the game is relatively standard fare for JRPGs. Yes, that means a group of youngsters off on an epic quest to save the world, levelling up, health-points and big spiky hair. Unlike many other JRPG classics, however, *Tales Of Symphonia* (and the inferior sequel that we're giving short shrift) uses a real-time battle system. There's a danger that those not playing for the purpose of nostalgia may find the game's combat (and its design in general) anachronistic, but it holds up surprisingly well, despite its age.

More likely to be an issue for newcomers is that it's all a bit bland. JRPGs are often chastised for having stock characters and cookie-cutter narratives and *Tales Of Symphonia* is the epitome of that. Add poor voice acting and uninspired locations and we're going to make ourselves unpopular by saying that the game doesn't hold up to the degree that its contemporaries do.

## MISSING LINK

### WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

**REPLACEMENT:** Given that *Tales Of Symphonia: Dawn Of The New World* is generally considered one of the weaker *Tales* games, we would've preferred to see another title from the series inserted in its place.

Indeed, the release of an HD remaster of *Final Fantasy X* and *X-2* on a console that is already well served when it comes to JRPGs is poor timing for *Chronicles*.

For those who haven't played a *Tales* game before, we'd suggest there are better options out there. However, if you're adamant about giving it a try or are returning to the series, *Chronicles* delivers satisfactorily.

**VERDICT** 6/10

DOES EXACTLY WHAT IT SAYS ON THE TIN



Above: *Tales Of Symphonia* has an appealing cel-shaded art style and some wonderfully attractive anime cutscenes. If only *Chronicles'* characters were as well drawn metaphorically as they are literally.





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Aside from the Maiden in Red, all non-combatative characters are wraiths with memory loss, each worried about their wife or child or missing head or something.

IT'LL LET YOU DOWN

# Betrayer

Perhaps as befits the name, *Betrayer* is seductive at first. It begins on the shore of early 17th Century America. The wind rushes through the tall grass, a contrast to the lack of human noise. Most of all, the world is almost entirely black and white, with the simple but clever effect that when you do come across a speck of red you're sure to pay attention. As you walk away from the sea, a cloaked figure on a hilltop shoots an arrow at a totem before you. The attached message tells you to turn back "lest you become trapped" as they are. You don't, of course, because this is a game and success requires moving forwards.

Unfortunately, *Betrayer* fails to offer much motivation beyond that even after several hours of play. Its disdain of hand-holding works to add to the layer of mystery over this story of an abandoned colony, but once you figure out the basic mechanics that part of the puzzle falls away. Rather than a curious wander through wilderness punctuated with surprise discoveries, progress becomes straightforward. Pressing X has you use a supernatural listening ability picked up in the opening chapter, but while following your ears feels thrilling at first, within the

## DETAILS

FORMAT: PC  
OTHER FORMATS: N/A  
ORIGIN: USA  
PUBLISHER: Blackpowder Games  
DEVELOPER: In-house  
PRICE: £14.99  
RELEASE: Out now  
PLAYERS: 1  
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

MINIMUM SPEC:  
3.0 GHz dual core or better, 3 GB RAM, DirectX 9 compatible with 1GB video RAM or better, 4 GB available space



context of the game it's just a slightly more interesting replacement for map markers. With regular pauses to check your aural bearing, you trek from amnesiac wraith to environmental clue to written note and back. As a premise, the exploration of an abandoned colony and the memories of its colonists is intriguing, but *Betrayer's* limitations render it mundane.

With the ease of following your ears, pace is enforced instead with combat against undead Conquistadors and other ghostly beings. On standard difficulty, where the shots they let loose the instant they see you are particularly damaging, it's necessary to sneak everywhere, which would be enough of a pain even without its inconsistent effectiveness. Turn down the difficulty, and perhaps turn up the colour so that you can better judge what's going on, and things get easier but unfortunately

remain dull. The enemies are too predictable and combat too repetitious to seem necessary, and the various loot – charms that up your speed by 4% and similarly meaningless collectables – seems even more superfluous.

Unfortunately, with those aspects stripped away *Betrayer* would have little left to prop it up. As with many of these first-person adventures, most of the characters are no longer around, and in this case it's particularly difficult to care about them. That may all be part of the overarching

message that seems to suggest that the real horror lies not in the supernatural but in human beings and the things they'll do to one another, but it seems a poor payoff for hours spent trudging through this black-and-white world.

## FINGERPRINT

### WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

**MONOCHROMATIC:** Blackpowder only released colour options in response to feedback from early access players. The default of high-contrast black and white that makes the world feel even stranger.



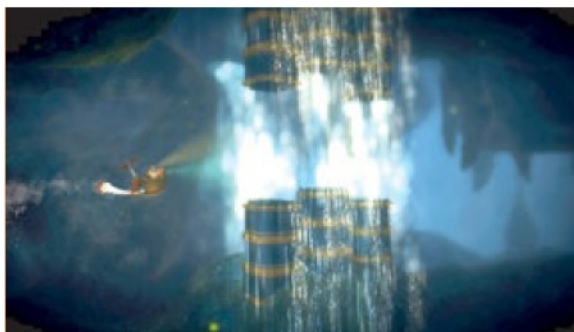
VERDICT **5/10**

SOME INTERESTING IDEAS, BUT ULTIMATELY AVERAGE



URNS OUT ABSINTHE DOESN'T  
MAKE THE HEART GROW FONDER

# Spate



**Left:** Bluth hops into an airship for short vehicular interludes that play out like the rocket barrel levels in the *Donkey Kong Country* games. There's no particular rhyme or reason for their inclusion, though they're more entertaining than much of Bluth's journey.

**Spate isn't the first game to deal with alcoholism, but its pitch is a compelling one all the same.** The brainchild of Eric Provan, an artist who has worked at Disney and Jim Henson's Creature Shop, it tells the story of Bluth, a detective investigating the death of a businessman in the toxic X-Zone Islands.

More intriguingly, Bluth is a man dealing with his own personal tragedies, turning to his favourite drink, absinthe, to numb the pain. This ties directly into the game's otherwise simplistic platforming systems: Bluth can take a swig in order to move faster and jump higher, but it comes at the cost of visual clarity, the backgrounds and platforms swaying, twisting and blurring. It's a fairly conventional technique to represent drunkenness, but it's a queasily effective one. Together with some striking art and an aggressively maudlin score, *Spate's* opening promises an eerie, atmospheric mystery. Which makes it all the more disappointing when that potential is squandered.

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## DETAILS

**FORMAT:** PC  
**OTHER FORMATS:** Mac, Linux  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**PUBLISHER:** Ayyo Games  
**DEVELOPER:** Eric Provan  
**PRICE:** £6.99  
**RELEASE:** Out now  
**PLAYERS:** 1  
**MINIMUM SPEC:** 2.0 GHz, 4 GB RAM, Nvidia 7600J/ATI X1600 or better, 2 GB available space  
**ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A



**Below:** *Spate* has plenty of rough edges. The sound effects are either drowned out by the score or in some cases they're entirely absent – the bounce pads boost Bluth upwards in total silence.



Provan has cited *Mario* and *Dear Esther* as influences, but as a platformer it's not in the same postal district as the former, while its writing falls well short of the latter's sharpness and intelligence. It plays more like a poor man's *Limbo*, but lacks the savageness or black humour of Playdead's traps. There's little challenge to speak of, beyond the odd death caused by Bluth's imprecise movement and some inconsistent collision detection. Indeed, there's never any need to take a gulp of Dutch courage beyond the first

time you're encouraged to: *Spate* can be completed without Bluth needing a drink, which rather undermines his addiction.

For most of *Spate's* two-hour duration, you'll be holding right to guide Bluth onwards, as the murder investigation becomes a more personal quest to discover the truth behind his daughter's

death. Yet it's evident that the script isn't capable of supporting a game with such a strong narrative focus. Provan may be a talented artist, but he's no writer, his script punctuated by jarring tonal shifts, including misjudged attempts at humour that deflate the melancholic ambience. Its funniest moments are entirely unintentional: "I could've sworn I just saw

my daughter in that fog," muses Bluth, a second before a giant, cartoonish face looms out of the mist.

Bluth's journey concludes with a choice, but you'll have to repeat the journey to see the other ending. The prospect of spending two more hours with this self-pitying drunk may be too much for even *Spate's* Kickstarter backers to take.

## MISSING LINK

### WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

**THE DRINKING MAN'S PLATFORMER:** There's potential for *Spate's* absinthe-swiggling mechanic to be developed into something interesting. But what seems like an interesting idea has been sadly wasted.

**VERDICT 3/10**

A TEDIOUS DESCENT INTO DRUNKEN MISERY





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DING DONG, THE WITCH IS DEAD

# The Witch And The Hundred Knight

**Nippon Ichi's latest effort resembles a terrible cocktail; one where the measurements are off, but the ingredients were wrong in the first place. Tabasco in a mojito.** Cyanide in an Old Fashioned. It's billed as an action-RPG, and while the usual item collection, HP, stamina, magic and weapon improvement are present and correct, Nippon Ichi has elected to cram so many other pointless systems into a game that wasn't actually asking for them to begin with.

For one, the menu system is vastly overcomplicated – needlessly so. The combat is a long way from best in class, but it can be fairly rewarding as you build the perfect combination of weaponry and dish out some pain to the denizens of the game's bizarre world. It's fairly deep too, and requires careful consideration by the player. The presence of different powers called Tochka, multiple character Facets, a strange item system and a seemingly pointless Domination mechanic seem superfluous when if more work was put into the combat we'd have a better game on our hands.

The storyline is typically bewildering, and follows the player-character – the titular Hundred Knight – through a strange fantasy world as it accomplishes questionable objectives on behalf of the swamp witch Metallia. Said witch is one of the most infuriating videogame characters we've ever had the misfortune of encountering,

## DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3  
OTHER FORMATS: N/A  
ORIGIN: Japan  
PUBLISHER: NIS America  
DEVELOPER: Nippon Ichi  
PRICE: £34.99  
RELEASE: Out now  
PLAYERS: 1  
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: The simple combat is all about creating chains through using equipment in a certain order.

and the game suffers for it. The developer revels in the unsavoury, to depict a girl calling her mother a "puking whore" and then turning her into a rodent with the intention of allowing other rodents to gang rape her is too far in our book.

It becomes very hard to laugh at a 'comedic' game when it relies on superfluous swearing and

allusions to rape, especially when the sections of dialogue in the game are oppressively long. There are games out there – *The Stick Of Truth* springs to mind – that can get away with uncomfortable humour, but in *The Witch And The Hundred Knight* any attempts at humour are contrived, juvenile and completely wide of the mark. The voice acting and writing are truly horrible at times as well, and it

all evens out to leave the player in the position of not really caring what is going on in terms of gameplay. It's all just a muddled and dissatisfying experience, unhappily augmented by horrible writing

and the very wrong kind of puerile humour.

Nippon Ichi fans will lap it up, but while certain mechanical elements are competent enough, the needlessly complicated nature

of the game detracts from what could've been an interesting, idiosyncratic fantasy. At times the developer's intentions are somewhat discernible, but for the most part, from a player's perspective, *The Witch And The Hundred Knight* feels sadly completely misjudged.

**VERDICT 4/10**  
A REAL MISFIRE FROM AN INTERESTING DEVELOPER



Above: The swamp witch Metallia truly is the most odious, despicable character we've ever met in a game. She is just terrible. It doesn't help that the voice acting is equally as terrible, especially when cutscenes run for what seems like years.



## DEATH OF A SPACEMAN

## Out There



**The aliens will get to you, and if they don't, deep space eventually will.** These are the respective lessons to be learned from playing *Faster Than Light* and *Out There* – the latter, on first inspection, a superficial touchscreen tribute to the former. However, scan a little beyond *Out There's* sketched star fields and internal top-down views and you will discover a game that is less concerned with boarding parties and more about reflective resource management, where a cargo of metals, oxygen, fuel and snatches of alien lingo are as integral to your quest for survival as maintaining a frantic crew is to *Faster Than Light's*.

There are shades of the classic *Starflight*, or, if you don't need spectacles to read this, the explorey bits of *Mass Effect*, as you arrive in each solar system to scan worlds and mine them for the elements that might keep your ship and its equipment running for one more jump. With every manoeuvre burning up your precious fuel and oxygen, and every

## DETAILS

FORMAT: Android  
OTHER FORMATS: iOS  
ORIGIN: France  
PUBLISHER: Mi-Clos Studio  
DEVELOPER: In-house  
PRICE: £2.99  
RELEASE: Out now  
PLAYERS: 1  
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



**Below:** You will fill up your cargo with stuff you don't need – until of course you dump it and find that you definitely did need it, after all. **Right:** The more you play, the more you pick up on alien language. Or you could just pick a response and hope for the best.



**Above:** This is you having overslept in your cryogenic cocoon. You were supposed to wake up on the other side of the Solar System, not some unknown corner of the galaxy. **Left:** There's no time to explore the wonders of the universe. Just take what you need and move on.

search for fuel likely to damage the hull, there are no easy decisions to be made here, only fleeting victories in which you come away with increasingly rare net gains from your costly actions.

If you're lucky you might chance across a derelict ship with a larger cargo bay, or a new piece of technology that stretches your dwindling resources just a shade further than before, but eventually your stock of luck will expire and your fate will be sealed, leaving you condemned and compelled to try the game again. Perhaps next time you'll gain that little bit more from encounters with the nervous aliens, or just simply be more fortunate in your attempts to risk what little you have for more of what you need.

While it shares with *FTL* a distinct brand of lo-fi visuals, random encounters and a left-to-right progression across a game

board of stars, *Out There* is essentially a game book – a *Starship Traveller* for the 21st Century, where skill, stamina and luck all diminish with each turn of the page. The story of an astronaut, woken from cryogenic freeze far from home, is a daily captain's log crossed with bleak flashes of humour – just enough to obscure what is in gameplay terms

## FINGERPRINT

## WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

**LESS IS MORE:** The haunting soundtrack initially seems at odds with the graphic novel visuals on offer, but both combine to highlight the stark simplicity of the gameplay and the harsh reality of the challenge that faces you.

more of an exercise in compelling futility as opposed to being a truly deep and dynamic challenge.

But here's the truly captivating thing about *Out*

*There*: as minimal as the gameplay may be, it doesn't diminish from the message that, as much as we may hope space offers a route to salvation, it's probably just as likely to be a one-way trip.

VERDICT **7/10**

A COMPELLING SCI-FI SHORT THAT'S WORTH REPEATING





## SHOOTING STARS

## Luftrausers

## DETAILS

FORMAT: PC  
 OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3,  
 PS Vita  
 ORIGIN: Netherlands  
 PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital  
 DEVELOPER: Vlambeer  
 PRICE: £6.99  
 RELEASE: Out now  
 PLAYERS: 1  
 ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



**Vlambeer has the unfortunate habit of having its greatest ideas poached before they have even reached the market, but as *Luftrausers* proves,** there's nothing quite like the developer's inimitable knack for compulsive gameplay experiences. Following from last year's *Ridiculous Fishing*, the studio switches the action up to the ocean of clouds, as players jump in the cockpit of a dinky airplane and take on endless waves of enemies in an addictive shoot-'em-up with an onus on survival. There's only one stage, with challenges and enemies evolving the longer you're able to live, and while we're yet to discover whether it's actually possible to reach an end game, the focus is clearly on chaining kills and racking up points.

Doing so rewards you with new parts for your aircraft. Toying with multiple combinations is intrinsic to the experience of *Luftrausers*' simplistic conceit and

finding the best mishmash of absurd components to suit your playstyle and working through tailored challenges to progress is entirely addictive. These objectives start off relatively easy, but scale as you rank up and it gives the player something to shoot for outside of a high score, even if the multiplier does cap at a certain point leaving you unable to increase your score significantly.

Matched with an attractive sepia tone and a thumping soundtrack, *Luftrausers* is an enthralling and time-sapping trial of nerve and persistence. It's certainly a game much more suited for pocket gaming and the Vita release will likely prove to be the essential version, but whatever your chosen flavour there's a quality to the design that'll shine through on any platform.

**VERDICT 8/10**  
 A WORTHWHILE TIME-DRAINER

**Below:** You can switch out three parts of your aircraft: the engine, the body and the guns. The combinations available are huge and you can spend hours tweaking.



## CAN HE BEAT THE TIMER? SHURIKEN

## 10 Second Ninja

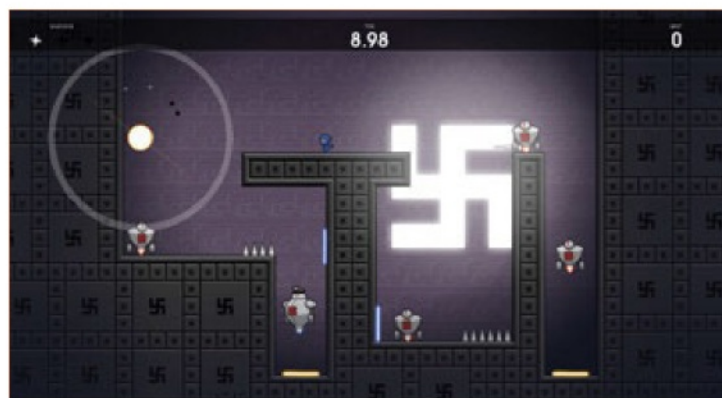
## DETAILS

FORMAT: PC  
 ORIGIN: UK  
 PUBLISHER: Mastertronic  
 DEVELOPER: Dan Pearce  
 PRICE: £6.99  
 RELEASE: Out now  
 PLAYERS: 1  
 ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



**The beauty of *10 Second Ninja* is that, at first, it makes everyone feel like they're bad at games.** You're cast as the titular ninja, a swift and agile hooded hero tasked with dismantling an army of robot Nazis within (you guessed it) ten seconds. Armed with a sword, three shurikens and the ability to double jump, the actual *real* aim here is nailing the quickest time possible to gain the coveted three-star rating.

It's here that the game sinks its hooks into you and gradually wears away your self-worth. The levels are not particularly challenging to complete in their own right but complex enough to leave you baffled when trying to figure out how to shave precious seconds off the timer. In that regard it's more like a puzzle game, working out the quickest route across the stage and which weapons to use and when. The end of each stage doesn't just display your time but also how many seconds you



**Above:** It's very little to do with who or what you're taking on, but how quickly you do it.



**Above:** Earning stars isn't just about bragging rights, they're used to unlock boss stages.

were away from the next star. Feeding into a meticulousness that's prevalent across the entirety of its design, right down to its responsive set of mechanics (it has been purpose-built for a controller), if it lacks anything then it's in the visuals, resembling something closer to a Flash game than a hip indie offering. But it's a minor quibble considering that what *10 Second Ninja* offers is a compulsive burst of deeply gratifying challenge.

**VERDICT 8/10**  
 FRUSTRATING ENOUGH TO MAKE YOU FURIOUS





The problem with C  
that no-one like opera  
society and all life  
peri

HE DIE

**“It wasn’t just a great  
game; it was one of  
the most interesting  
social sandboxes  
I’ve ever seen”**

**KRISTOFFER TOUBORG, RIOT GAMES**

Lord Blackthorn: Do you think such a  
valtry spell can harm one such as  
Blackthorn?





Chaos is I think your  
tes, invincible.. that fire  
wouldn't hurt you or  
Blackthorn..  
LB is dead!!!

ED

## WHY I ... Ultima Online

KRISTOFFER TOUBORG, RIOT GAMES

**66** Looking back, the game that inspired me to get into the industry was probably Ultima Online. In retrospect, this is the game that has meant the most to me and continues to inspire me. It wasn't just a great game; it was one of the most interesting social sandboxes I've ever seen. If you want to find the grandfather of massively-multiplayer RPG this would be it. I still get slightly fanboy-ish when I'm around people who worked on that. I wish it would get more recognition than it does, but for me it will always have a special place in my heart.





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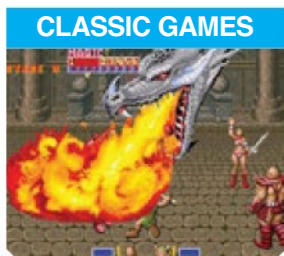


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**GAME CHANGERS**

## TOMB RAIDER

The very first Lara Craft adventure didn't just introduce us to gaming's first female celebrity, it packed a 3D punch that changed the landscape of platforming forever

**GOD OF WAR**

**130 BEHIND THE SCENES**

At the death of the PS2, Sony pulled out one of the most compelling and violent brawlers ever to grace any console



**CONTRA III**

**138 BEST BOSS**

Why the showdown with Big Faust is among the most memorable boss fights of the 16-bit era

**THE PICKFORD BROS.**

**144 INTERVIEW**

Appearing in the credits to almost 100 games, The Pickford Brothers have pretty much seen it all



**LLAMASOFT**

**148 THE RETRO GUIDE**

Jeff Minter has been pumping homes full of arcade-inspired greatness for more than 30 years



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BEHIND THE SCENES

# GOD OF WAR

Who would you get behind? An orange marsupial, a hovering space car, or a furious half-naked demigod with chains grafted to his wrists? God Of War director David Jaffe reveals how Kratos was a really angry blessing for PlayStation 2...





## MASCOTS COME IN all shapes and sizes.

If there were some perfect creation process, chances are the most successful gaming heroes of all time wouldn't be an out-of-shape plumber and a hedgehog that isn't even the right colour. No, there's no science to it all, hence why we probably shouldn't be all that surprised that Sony's unexpected mascot for the PS2 era came in the form of gaming's angriest man. The last great example of a platform holder giving one of its studios almost full creative control over a project could easily have gone so badly wrong, but the history books tell us otherwise – *God Of War* managed to make ancient history exciting for a whole new audience, just as *Clash Of The Titans* had done nearly 25 years earlier, with cutting edge technology once again at the forefront of bringing legends back to life and capturing the imaginations of a generation.

Strange to think, then, that *God Of War* might never have existed had one of the other options on the table at the time been given the green light first. Founding father of the franchise, game director and personable semi-automatic cuss rifle David Jaffe talks us through some of the other options and, with all due respect, it isn't hard to see why Kratos came out on top. "I was looking at a game – we were calling it *Dead Man* at the time – and it was an open-world first-person game," he reveals. "It wasn't exactly survival horror – it wasn't so slow-paced – but it was trying to do like an action-adventure set in the Louisiana swamps and bayou about voodoo and supernatural powers, so the character would have these abilities and powers. I liked the idea of doing an open-world, first-person game and there hadn't been a lot of those at the time." Given that *Shadow Man* never exactly took off to the degree Acclaim would have hoped and the technical limitations of PS2, we can't say we're entirely surprised to hear that a game we only just heard about was cancelled a decade ago.

"Another one that didn't get as far came from us talking a lot about trying to create a way for gameplay to evoke the same kind of emotions as watching *Lupin*

*III*, the one that Miyazaki did," Jaffe continues. "How could we make a game that puts you in that same kind of feeling of high adventure?" The spirit of this project seemed to make it into the final game, even if the original pitch never really got off the ground. Indeed, there was always a clear front-runner for some of the team, it would appear, and Jaffe confirms as much. "Those were competing for the longest time but then I think it was ultimately was Ken Feldman, who was the art director on all of them, who said that out of all of the ideas, it was the *God Of War* universe that we'd best be able to realise in a really spectacular way. That was when we finally said 'Fuck it, let's go with this one'."

Hell, it wasn't even *God Of War* back then. "After *Twisted Metal Black* shipped, we spent probably four or five months iterating about four ideas – talking to the team, seeing what they would be into, fleshing out some of the concepts to see which one had the greatest potential. From that, ultimately *Dark Odyssey* – which became *God Of War* – won out, kicking off with the high concept of 'What if Paul Verhoeven had directed *Clash Of The Titans*?' but we changed that to 'What if Ridley Scott had directed *Clash Of The Titans*?' for the second document because nobody knew who Paul Verhoeven was."

Lack of cinema knowledge on the production team's end aside, it seems as though Jaffe and his team had prepared concepts for *God Of War* that differed radically from that original seed. "I still have a document showing the very adult, edgy and violent version of what this game could be, which is obviously what it became, but also all the way down to sort of Disney's *Hercules*... maybe we'd do something that was a little more *Mario*," he tells us. "We originally started out with the idea of doing first-person melee, so *God Of War* was originally going to be first-person. It didn't get very far – we talked to some of the programmers about it and did a lot of research. Dreamcast had a game out at the time that was kind of the best in breed for first-person melee, called *Maken X*. We studied that a lot trying to figure out if we



Released: July 2005

Format: PlayStation 2

Publisher: Sony

Developer: Sony Santa

Monica

Shannon Studstill, producer

Tim Moss, lead programmer

Ken Feldman, lead artist



■ Unique combat moves while hanging and climbing made Kratos feel all-powerful. There's no situation in which you're left without a way in which to ruin someone's day.

## DELETED SCENES

David Jaffe on the sequences that didn't quite make the cut



### THE LIFT

"We built a wonderful level which you can see on some of the behind-the-scenes materials – an elevator through the desert level.

With that elevator level, we couldn't figure out how to get the sand to trap the elevator, so we had to table that."

### THE WINGS

"We had the Icarus wings in the first game too and even though I think they look beautiful in the third game, I liked the way we were talking about using them in our game. It was more of a Joust mechanic, more about full three-dimensional

exploring, combat and flying and less about that kind of tunnel where you're just dodging obstacles. But that's one fucking beautiful tunnel in *God Of War III*."

### THE LABYRINTH

"Tobin designed a level that I ended up ripping off for *Twisted Metal* [2012]. It was a maze that started with Kratos in this big open environment, with the walls coming up and down in real-time and changing the level layout. So it was about being in this space that was constantly changing and having to adjust. So we ended up using that for the arena level in *Twisted Metal* on PS3, but I regret that not going because that was such a cool idea."



■ Brutal finishing moves were the perfect way to end any encounter, especially considering the extra rewards in the form of Orbs. Man, that Kratos really loves his Orbs...

could make it work. And *GTA III* had just come out, so we were kicking around the idea of open world. So yeah, it really was a very broad initial conceptual phase while we were looking at this idea and a couple of others, and it just sort of evolved into *God Of War* through a great deal of combat and fighting and yelling at each other."

Even though Jaffe is clearly talking about the design process there, he's done an equally good job of describing the game the team ended up making – loud, brash and with precious few pulled punches. That said, the game's violent streak was all kinds of intentional and for a number of reasons. "As a kid I'd seen and read family-friendly Greek mythology, but I was reading Edith Hamilton to research a lot of this stuff before we went into development and the stories themselves can be easily read to be very gruesome and violent. It was definitely a good fit," explains Jaffe. "It wasn't like we were saying we wanted to do an ultra-violent Lego game – it was more about taking that mythology and playing up the angle that it was really violent, which seems to be something our audience really responds to. It was just having the awareness to spot that match and allow us a better shot at retail."

■■■ HOLD UP A SECOND – did the games industry's resident swear grenade just cough up some retail jargon? Fear not, the decision to make *God Of War* a bloody rampage wasn't entirely written in dollar signs – it was as much a creative decision as it was a commercial one. "I like violent stuff," Jaffe reveals, to the surprise of literally nobody who has ever played a game the man has worked on. "That's why I said Paul Verhoeven in the original pitch – I like that fun, over-the-top, acrobatic violence in movies and games. But I remember being very clear about the fact that we'd have to make sure that this was brutal and intense because if we didn't add that layer, it would look like you were just a dude running around in a helmet and a toga."

And perhaps that's why this cultural vein hadn't really been tapped at all during gaming's difficult teenage years – good as the source material may have been, nobody could find that angle to make it exciting and fresh. That takes passion, which Jaffe clearly has in spades. He has a deep-seated love for the subject matter and, as evidenced by the best historical shooters, wartime RTS games and even football management titles, sometimes that's enough of a spark to light up a classic. "Greek mythology



■ Sony Santa Monica got more out of the PS2 than pretty much any of its peers.





■ There aren't a huge amount of bosses in the original game but regular enemies make up for this shortfall by often being huge.

## WHAT THEY SAID...



God Of War manages to keep the pace slick, the settings beautiful, the action fresh and the body count high

NowGamer, 2005



has been something that I've loved since I was in like fourth grade," he shares. "Clash Of The Titans was an extremely flawed, wonderful movie – when you're ten years old and watching it, it's just, like... wow. That was the summer of '81 when *Clash Of The Titans* came out, *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* had come out, and when you look at *God Of War*, there's clearly a great deal of influence from both of those films. It's like superheroes – it's totally ready to go for videogame creation, with all these amazing powers, monsters, abilities and locations. And very few people had trodden that territory at that time."

Since nobody had done a proper mythological adventure in quite some time, it stands to reason that another would be announced while Sony Santa Monica's baby was still in the womb. "I remember once, we were waist-deep in development of *God Of War* and we saw a story online about a game... what the fuck was that game called? It came and it went and it got horrible reviews but to see it and to see their concept art and to read their PR, we just thought we were gonna be so fucking dead," recalls Jaffe. "They beat us to the punch, those sons of bitches!" Fortunately for Sony, this is the games industry, and not every title has the heavyweight credentials or the vision to turn a great concept into a great game, and Jaffe tells us about the moment the competition stopped... well, competing. "We saw it at E3 and breathed a sigh of relief – it wasn't all that great, not to be disrespectful to the people

who made it but clearly they were hampered by budget issues."

■■■ WHETHER HE'S TALKING about *Rygar* or *Shadow Of Rome* or any number of the nine million other PS2 games we've forgotten is kind of irrelevant – it's a classic scenario that we see to this day (albeit

**I WAS HEAVILY INFLUENCED – AND I'M SURE I'M NOT ALONE – BY RAY HARRYHAUSEN AND HIS WORK**

to a lesser extent, now that budgets on triple-A games have gone daft) where lesser publishers and developers will sniff out popular themes for upcoming hits and try to outrun them. We can count on one hand the number of times it has really worked out, so maybe the budget hike has actually helped out in that regard. But even so, how was it that *God Of War* stumbled upon this content goldmine that every other game just strolled past on the way to work each day?

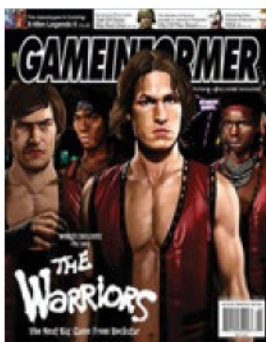
"I guess it has to do with influences, right?," reasons Jaffe. "I was heavily influenced – and I'm sure I'm not alone – by Ray Harryhausen and his work. That was always something that appealed to me and





■ It's surprisingly hard to take a screenshot of *God Of War* where something isn't bleeding to death...

## WHAT THEY SAID...



Difficult to resist the urge to simply genuflect and be humbled to be in the presence of such digital divinity

Game Informer,  
Issue 145  
May 2005



■ something I wanted to play with. It was around the time that we were doing *God Of War* that we were starting to see a shift towards budgets going up pretty significantly. There was that time too when PSone was still out towards the beginning of PS2 and development was still inexpensive enough that you would see all these different games, things like *Second Sight* and *Psi-Ops* – there was this game on PSone, *Tale Of The Sun* or something, about a fucking caveman! – which are the kinds of subjects that are now more the world of indies, because they're affordable and you can take those kinds of chances. We came at the end of that, when most games had started having to play safe, whether it was military shooters or, at the time, crime sims like *GTA*. But Sony being Sony was always so great about letting their developers explore things that aren't just marketing-sanctioned safe genres and we were still allowed to play in those waters."

Today's market, of course, is somewhat different. Big name studios and publishers have shut up shop and others have tightened purse-strings, while unrealistic goals have seen successful games be judged otherwise. "I think it'd be really hard and expensive to compete today purely on spectacle," Jaffe nods. "But what's cool is that there are elements of *God Of War* that have nothing to do with the spectacle – level design, story, characters – that you can do with two or three people with a copy of *Unity* or *Game Maker Pro*. That's phenomenal and in that way, the market is wonderful today. But I think if you're talking about building a game where the total reason for it to exist is spectacular setpieces... it's still doable for sure but you have to have a lot of fucking money.

That was the reason I went away after that game and moved onto more mechanics-based titles. You're only as good as your tech on that day. I want our games to stand up even after the visuals aren't as hot as they once were, where the core mechanics are something you could come back to ten years later and say 'Okay, it's really rough but fuck, it's still really fun'. I don't think I've achieved that yet but working with that game

## I WANT OUR GAMES TO STAND UP TEN YEARS LATER

showed me that for me, that was sort of the North Star to follow. If you just chase the spectacle, the applause you get for it is pretty fucking cheap."

■■■ SPECTACLE MUST HAVE been fairly high on the agenda in creating *God Of War*, mind. But were there any examples of tech not being able to match concept? "The game was so scripted that there wasn't a lot," Jaffe muses. "When we asked for something and they said they couldn't do it, usually that was coming from production rather than tech." One issue, though, would have given Digital Foundry a collective heart attack. "There was the giant crusher at the bottom of Pandora's temple and [the guys] just kept throwing enemies in until it dropped to like 12fps. But we all thought it was fucking awesome – we didn't care that it was 12fps 'cause the idea was so cool and it still worked. But then Tim came over and you'd have

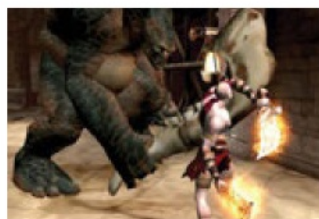


## > A GAMING EVOLUTION

Legacy Of Kain: Soul Reaver > God Of War > Bayonetta



Razeel's starring role was a game about spectacle and a journey, two areas on which Jaffe and his team spent a lot of time.



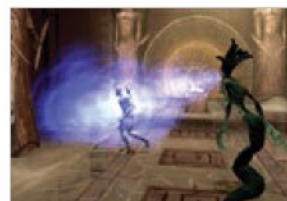
Witches, angels, swearing and a bit of the old ultra-violence... Platinum's hardcore action game takes it to the next level.



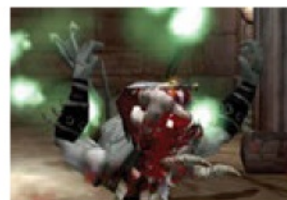
thought that his head was about to explode. We fought about frame rate. I care about frame rate only when it hampers the game. So we fought about that, but there was one fight I did lose. I just couldn't convince Tim and Mike and even to this day I'm like 'What the fuck?' – I think he must have made a deal with the devil saying 'I will make you a great programmer but you must never use translucency in any game' or something. I kept saying that we had to have the environment go semi-transparent or we'd have to pull the camera too far back, and we wanted to keep the

camera close so it was more dramatic. Almost every other game out there was making the characters and/or the environment go semi-transparent, but you'd have thought I was asking him to go assassinate his parents or something. It was not going to be done on his motherfucking watch. It was fucking bad and even to this day, you can tell I'm still a little annoyed by it, because we could have had some amazing cinematic moments in that game if it weren't for the fact that the goddamn engine didn't support translucency."

For all that it may seem like *God Of War* might today be a case of style over substance – especially with so many unlikely usurpers in the likes of *Revengeance*, *Bayonetta* and *DmC* strutting their hardcore action stuff – that absolutely wasn't the case with the original. Jaffe reflects on meetings of minds where gameplay had to come first. "The guys at Santa Monica are some of the best of the best when it comes to programming. And whenever I asked for something or heard a great idea from the team, most of the time a month later it was in the game. They were a pretty impressive group to work with." Have the special effects guys kill the rainbows and the twinkly music, though – this is Jaffe we're talking to, not Bono. "But they were a pain in the ass to work with, and I'm sure they'd say the



■ Petrified? Worry not – escaping is as easy as wagging an analog stick.



■ Sure, Kratos can use different weapons, but the Blades Of Chaos are always most satisfying.

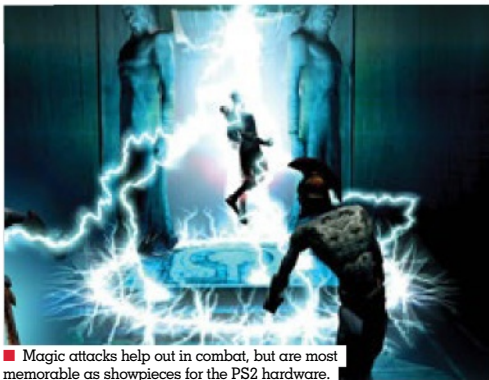


■ As much as we dig *God Of War's* concept art, we'd love to see the Disney-style mock-ups that Jaffe mentions.

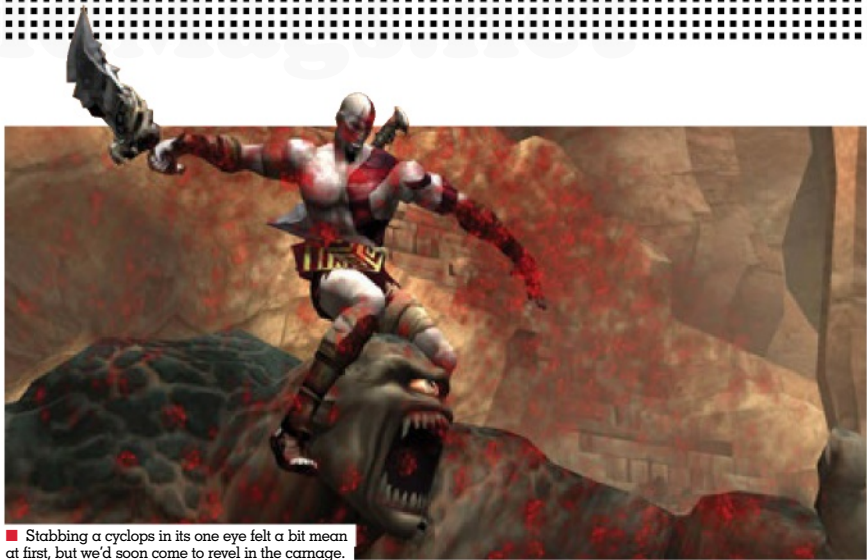


same about me," he admits. "Tim and I really didn't get along very well. Me being American and him being British, him being a programmer and me being more of a high-level designer... just one against the other, even just culturally, that can sometimes be enough to break the camel's back. But when you've got cultural *and* discipline differences and you put those people on a project for three years together? I'd work with Tim again, I don't know if he'd work with me but I respect him greatly as a programmer. We got along fine outside of it. But as colleagues, I fucking wanted to blow his head off every single day and I think he probably wanted to do the same thing to me."

Internal struggles aside, it all looked rosy just as soon as the Hydra demo hit and people got to experience the game themselves. But even with that buzz going around, there was still enough apprehension to make the team second-guess themselves at every turn, as Jaffe vividly recalls. "I remember being at the office with Todd Papy, looking up at this giant poster of Kratos that we'd had made for E3 – it still hangs in the Sony Santa Monica office, actually – and thinking 'This is going to be fucking *huge*'. But within a week, I was in Gamestop and saw the *God Of War* 'coming soon' box and it was stuck way up high on the shelf out of the way. Nothing had changed – if anything, the game had only gotten better as we got closer to completion – but I remember thinking it was going to fucking tank and be a disaster." But, as it happens, *God Of War* was quite a good videogame (hence this celebration) and such a success for Sony that it's now easily one of the leading PlayStation brands. But there wasn't always such confidence, even internally. "On the day of release, a friend of mine texted me to say



■ Magic attacks help out in combat, but are most memorable as showpieces for the PS2 hardware.



■ Stabbing a cyclops in its one eye felt a bit mean at first, but we'd soon come to revel in the carnage.



■ We haven't think how many times we beat that original Hydra demo. It was lots, though.



## ON LETTING GO

■ **CREATING AN ICON** for a company you don't belong to can't exactly be easy, but David Jaffe is surprisingly upfront about how he managed to avoid forging bonds with Kratos as a character. "I feel an attachment to the first and second

games," he tells us. "The others are titles that I have great respect for – friends of mine have worked on them, some that I hold in incredibly high regard. I love to see them succeed, and as a company as well given the investment.

But I don't feel an attachment. I feel a connection to the first two titles but post-*GOWII*, I've had zero regrets. I've watched them on from the sidelines but I don't feel like it's my character out there or anything like that."







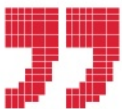
■ Combining area attacks and more powerful linear strikes makes for a versatile move set – one where mashing is fine but there's depth as well.

## WHAT THEY SAID...



It's set in Greece with the mighty Kratos... and we loved every minute of it

Play, issue 129  
May 2005



there was a line out the door at the game store," Jaffe tells us. "I thought he was full of shit but there totally was this line out the door. We had days when we thought we were onto something and days where we sat around figuring out what our next careers were going to be 'cause we were clearly no good at this."

■ ■ ■ Some critics would argue that there's a case to be made for the latter, especially in light of some of the game's end-game sequences. "Well, Tobin did the spikes," smiles Jaffe as his new studio explodes with enough laughter to level a small village. The accused interjects. "You were just supposed to get knocked down the spikes a little bit, just so you wouldn't get stuck on them," explains level designer Tobin A. Russell. "You weren't supposed to get knocked off entirely." The problem, it seems, was born of over-confidence. "The coders promised they were going to deal with the collision on that," Jaffe confesses. "But what happened



■ Do it, Kratos. Give that guy a really nasty rope burn. The demigod's violent streak can never be sated.

was we had focus-tested the shit out of that game and it's a linear process so by the time we got to focus-

**[HADES] WAS THE LAST LEVEL OF THE GAME, SO WE DIDN'T FOCUS TEST THAT ONE, AND IT BIT US IN THE ASS**

testing Hades – which is where that area is, at the end of the level – we were just like 'Nah, we got it, we're good'. It was literally the last level of the game so we didn't focus test that one, and that was the one that bit us in the ass. I regret that section, because it really was a shelf moment for a number of gamers."

Issues aside, it's fair to say that *God Of War* carved out a template for a generation of would-be mascots to follow. But, as it turns out, some of the biggest names in the business can't tell you when they're onto something. "It was all just a big fucking blur," Jaffe admits. "There were a lot of nights where we were there until three in the morning and those nights blend into the other nights. There are people that you meet that you'd want to work with for the rest of your career, then there are people that I have wonderful memories of but won't speak to today. I can't fucking stand some of them today and some of them I think are just amazing. There are all these little moments that sort of add up to give you a recollection of an experience that, in my mind, was extremely hard but extremely fulfilling and extremely worthwhile. We made something that we're really proud of."







RETRO



## CONTRA III: THE ALIEN WARS SNES [KONAMI] 1992

RELEASED IN PAL territories as *Super Probotector: Alien Rebels*, *Contra III* was the first instance that the muscular franchise was developed exclusively for home console. And it didn't disappoint, bringing with it a knowing absurdity and Eighties machismo wrapped in a ceaseless torrent of bulletfire and explosions. In an obvious homage to James Cameron's original *Terminator*, *Contra III*'s iconic Big Faust boss battle delights in keeping players on their toes. It begins with two robotic creatures vigorously jumping around the room until you rip them in half, but the battle only really begins when the boss proper arrives. Tearing its steel claws through the scenery and ripping the walls apart, this gargantuan machine is a true testament to *Contra*'s creative ingenuity, not only presenting colossal spectacle within the confines of a 16-bit stage but backing up its presentation with an unrelenting challenge.

# GAME CHANGERS TOMB RAIDER

Released: 25 October 1996 Publisher: Eidos Interactive Developer: Core Design  
System: PlayStation, PC, Sega Saturn



Tomb Raider actually had locations inspired by real history – Vilcabamba (pictured), for example, was the last stronghold of the Incas before the Spanish invaded in 1572.

Released back in 1996, *Tomb Raider* unleashed Lara Croft on the world – who would become more than just a protagonist, but a legitimate celebrity

**CAST YOUR MIND BACK TO 1996** – in the world of gaming, 3D was new. It was unknown ground and a lot of console developers were still testing the waters. Moving away from the pre-rendered backgrounds and the isometric views of the early PSOne games, *Tomb Raider* was arguably the first action-adventure game to do 3D properly. The original instalment of *Tomb Raider* hit a laser-focused sweet spot in the blooming Nineties games industry – it presented a good, well-made, innovative game, while simultaneously appealing directly to the teen and young adult market. *Tomb Raider* observed what *Super Mario 64* was doing with 3D platforming, and took the genre to PlayStation's gamers – a move, it would turn out – that would cement *Tomb Raider* and Lara Croft's place in gaming history forever.

*Tomb Raider's* release came six months after *Super Mario 64*; a game that was, for a lot of people, perfect. It introduced watertight 3D mechanics and presented them in a familiar and accessible way. *Tomb Raider* went the exact opposite direction, appealing to the PlayStation's more hardcore audience. Rather than applying to the cutesy, family-friendly template *Mario* had set out, *Tomb Raider* focused on violence

and exploration – taking its cues from the myriad action-adventure films that popularised Hollywood during the early Nineties. *Tomb Raider* was an archaeological fantasy – a benchmark game in the evolution of action platforming and woven deeply into the DNA of the likes of *Uncharted*, the recent *Prince Of Persia* games and even more action-orientated affairs like *InFamous*. Lara moved incredibly well for a character designed in 1996; her acrobatics were expertly designed and everything always felt natural – flipping, jumping, side-stepping, scaling walls: it was all a pleasure to do. Supported by clear visual language – you always knew where to climb, what to grab on to or how far to jump – *Tomb Raider* truly brought platforming into a safe 3D realm.

The structure of the game was simple – explore this, solve this puzzle, fight these enemies. Rinse, repeat. But therein lay the game's success – it didn't overcomplicate things, it didn't push its core mechanics too far. The game introduced you to a few abilities and created puzzles in which every ability was fully explored. *Tomb Raider* had a sense of skill progression that made the player feel smart for manipulating, even though it was mostly scripted



## THE ANATOMY OF TOMB RAIDER | WHAT INSPIRED CORE DESIGN TO CREATE LARA IN THE FIRST PLACE?



### THE CITY OF DERBY

★ Core Design's offices in the Midlands city of Derby actually played a big part in forming the basis for the design of Croft Manor – one of the most iconic places players come across in any *Tomb Raider* game. The city of Derby honoured Lara's legacy by renaming one of their main roads 'Lara Croft Way'.



### INDIANA JONES

★ Surprising exactly no-one, Lara was originally developed to be similar to a female Indy – even her name bore the same roots, starting out as Laura Cruz. As Core Design began fleshing Laura's character out more, they decided she needed to be more English – specifically 'a proper English lady'.



### ACCIDENTAL BREASTS

★ Lara's (in)famous bosom was the result of a modelling accident: when playing with Lara's model, designer Toby Gard accidentally moved the bosom measurements up to 150 per cent of the placeholder size. The other designers saw the alteration and encouraged Gard to keep it – the entire six-man team 'loved it'.



### INTERNATIONAL MYTHOLOGY

★ By having Lara spelunk her way through caves and tombs around the world, Core had the licence to include all manner of legendary beasts, from Greek to Egyptian. By tapping into more questionable parts of ancient history (re: Atlantis), Core could also handily *invent* mythologies to throw into the mix.

– the illusion of this much control made everyone playing the game feel brilliant for solving this fiendish puzzle or taking out this ridiculous enemy.

*Tomb Raider*'s other strength laid in its ambitious environments – looking back now, the textures and blocky objects seem amateurish, but at the time, the visuals were breaking new ground. From the claustrophobic confines of stone corridors and cave routes to grand, expansive halls forgotten for millennia, each location seemed relevant and logical – the world building in the game was masterful.

■■■ The considered architectural approach to building the game sat alongside smooth animations, impressive loading speeds and movement, advanced lighting and application of colour – all these elements combined to produce a game that was not just pleasant to look at, but was technically sophisticated. Compared to the low resolutions and primary colours of *Mario*, *Tomb Raider* was a visual masterpiece.

The game's treatment of Lara as its protagonist was both groundbreaking and controversial – Lara was the first female action hero the games industry

### KEY FACTS

■ *Tomb Raider* turned the fortunes of Eidos around – the year before the game's release, Eidos suffered a \$2.6 million loss. After *Tomb Raider*, profits soared to \$14.5 million.

■ There was never a cheat code on console games to unlock 'nude Lara' – but there was a patch for PC that applied the naked skin to Lara's model. Eidos sent out a cease and desist to all sites hosting the patch.

■ The game was originally developed on Sega Saturn development kits, but *Tomb Raider* would eventually find success on PlayStation, and the first instalment was the only Saturn game in the series.

had seen and, while the original itself took care to treat her job as a protagonist seriously, her sexualised appearance and infamous proportions were also clearly marketing tools (albeit ridiculously successful ones). Lara straddled an uncanny middle ground: she was daring, inspirational and ferocious, but she also ran around the jungle in hotpants and a low-cut top. Lara's physical presence caught the attention of Timberland and Lucozade – whether she liked it or not, she was pushing gaming into mainstream media in ways the previous gaming mascots never could. Lara wasn't for children; she was an advert for adult gaming, something the console market hadn't had the luxury of showing off before.


Lara's character was always admirably set up, though; where Eidos could have thrown Lara at you and said 'Look: sexy action lady!' it didn't, for the most part, opting instead to humanise Lara in a realistic and emphatic way. Lara was an upper-class millionaire, living in the lap of luxury and knowing little of struggle. When her plane crashes on her return from a skiing trip, Lara becomes a survivalist – her return to civilisation bores her, so she sets out to globetrot, seeking treasure and excitement.

Chances are, back in 1996, you'd never been plonked in the middle of a jungle and been given the simple 'Survive!' goal before. You and Lara were going through these learning curves at the same time – and that narrative conceit made you associate more with her situation, bringing you into the game more. Lara was a determined lady, out for herself, out for plunder and glory. She was Nathan Drake before Nathan Drake – the Indiana Jones of videogames, both in terms of legacy and iconic status. And that, more than anything, is why Lara remains so strongly rooted in gaming's collective consciousness.

**THE GAME'S TREATMENT OF LARA AS ITS PROTAGONIST WAS GROUNDBREAKING AND CONTROVERSIAL**

## GAME CHANGERS

# THE 10 SPELUNKING LESSONS TOMB RAIDER TAUGHT US

 LARA'S SHEER DISREGARD FOR ANY HEALTH AND SAFETY RULES REMAIN INSPIRATIONAL TO THIS DAY. HERE ARE THE 10 BEST LESSONS LARA TAUGHT US ABOUT THE ART OF SURVIVALISM



## A T-REX IS NO MATCH FOR A HANDGUN (TOMB RAIDER [1996])

■ LARA TAUGHT US that if you come across an enormous T-Rex in the middle of a clearing in a thick, tropical jungle – don't panic. Merely pull out your handguns, sink a couple of magazines into its flank while strafing about, and you'll be just fine. Just make sure you don't get too close – those teeth are sharp.



## NEEDY BUTLERS CAN BE DEALT WITH (TOMB RAIDER II)

■ WINSTON – LARA'S LOYAL butler that would follow you around, wherever you went – could be seen as a little needy. If you felt that he needed to 'cool off' a little, you could just lead him to the freezer and lock him in. Sounds cruel, but Winston always turned out okay in the end, right? Right?



## GARDEN ASSAULT COURSES ARE THE WAY TO GREATNESS (TOMB RAIDER II)

■ THE FIRST *TOMB RAIDER* only let you explore the interior of Lara's not-so-humble-abode, but once the sequel came out, you realised the sassy spelunker had a whole training ground in her back yard. That made us think: if we had those resources available to us, we'd be an invincible tomb raider too, surely?



## EXPLODING YOURSELF IS BAD (TOMB RAIDER II)

■ WALK ONE STEP forward, one step back, turn around three times and jump forward. BANG: Lara is exploded into a blocky spatter of body parts and flies around the screen. We tried re-creating this bizarre sequence in real life and it just looked like a weird interpretive dance. Don't try this at home, kids.





## SOMETIMES IT'S BETTER TO JUST STAY AT HOME (TOMB RAIDER [2013])

■ AFTER YOUR STUDIES, do you fancy blowing off responsibility and travelling the globe? Maybe you want to find yourself, or visit that country you've loved all your life? 2013's *Tomb Raider* taught us that a gap year isn't always what it's cracked up to be especially if you end up heading to the Dragon's Triangle.



## LONDON'S UNDERGROUND IS FULL OF FREAKS (TOMB RAIDER III)

■ A LOT OF DIFFERENT narratives take a guess as to what *really* dwells beneath London's cobbled streets, but *Tomb Raider III* saw a catsuited Lara delve into the depths of our capital to find a group of narcissistic troglodytes that burnt away their flesh in search of eternal youth.



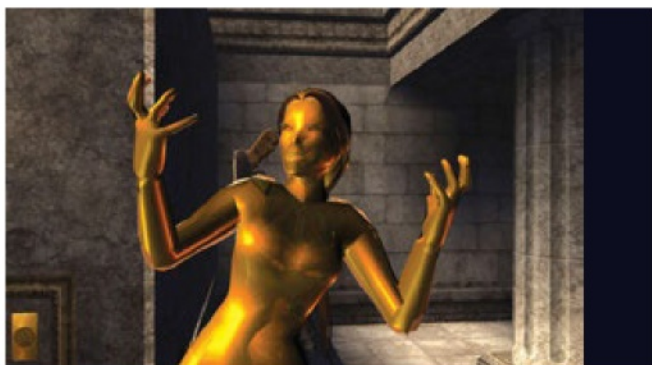
## YOUNG EXPLORERS LOVE BUNCHES (TOMB RAIDER: THE LAST REVELATION)

■ WHEN WE GET a flashback to young Lara in *The Last Revelation*, we see that she's got her hair tied up in bunches in place of her trademark ponytail. Maybe she was being extra-cautious – or maybe it was just Crystal Dynamics saying, "How do we make Lara look younger? ...Bunches!"



## WHEN UNDERWATER, DON'T ALWAYS HEAD UP (TOMB RAIDER II)

■ AFTER STRIPPING DOWN and changing into a wetsuit in front of a po-faced Tibetan Monk, Lara dives down into a cave pool to chase a submarine. After the pilot of the vessel is chewed up by a shark, you're given 30 seconds to find air. You have to fight against instinct, though: going *up* will only lead to a watery grave.



## MIDAS' TOUCH IS A REAL THING (TOMB RAIDER ANNIVERSARY)

■ DEMONSTRATING SOME OF *Tomb Raider's* most original puzzling and interesting level design, the hand of Midas is a death trap waiting to happen. Anyone who is familiar with the old Greek myth will know that Midas turns anything he touches into gold. Apparently, this also includes Lara.



## THE GRAPPLE HOOK IS YOUR BEST FRIEND (TOMB RAIDER: LEGEND)

■ AS OF *TOMB RAIDER: Legend*, the technology had advanced enough to allow Lara a lot more animation freedom. As a result, she handily came across the grapple hook, which allowed her to wall run, create pulley systems and play with the game's physics to get her to new destinations and secret passages.



RETRO

## INTERVIEW

# THE PICKFORD BROTHERS

With more than 25 years of experience in the industry, Ste and John Pickford have seen it all. Having worked for themselves and for others, they discuss their careers so far

It was a partnership that started almost by accident. Ste had ambitions to pursue a career as a comic book designer while older brother John had been taken by 8-bit computers and was becoming an accomplished coder.

But with Ste finding himself working at the same games development company as John and with both becoming disillusioned, they decided to collaborate in October 1986. So one of gaming's most enduring sibling pairings formed.

The duo have been credited on dozens of games including *Zub*, *Rasterscan*, *Plok* and *Magnetic Billiards*. They've worked for Rare, Software Creations and Binary Design and set up three of their own studios: Zippo, Zed-Two and Zee-3. Having been part of the thought process behind industry body TIGA, the Pickford Bros are coming up with great ideas to this day.



**Ste, you started 'life' as a comic book designer. Why did illustration interest you?**

**Ste Pickford:** I just wanted to be a comic artist as I was a kid. I loved comics. It started with the standard British humour weeklies and DC Comics like *Superman* that our local newsagent stocked, then I was captivated by the Marvel UK black and white reprints of *Spider-Man*, *Hulk*, and *Star Wars*. In my early teens I was much more interested in comics like *Warrior* and *Swamp Thing* than I was in computer games.

**How was it that you first got involved with computers?**

**SP:** I always wanted to get on John's computer and I did a bit of programming when he'd let me on his Spectrum or Amstrad. I drew some pictures using a drawing 'package' he wrote but I had no career ambitions to work with computers.

**When did you get your first computer, John, and what fascinated you about them?**

**John Pickford:** I got a ZX81 for Christmas. Back then, just having control over the

image on a TV was an amazing thing (I'm thinking, the original Pong style videogames) so to actually type and program was like something out of science fiction to me. I don't recall ever wanting to do anything other than make games.

**John, you went to Binary Design first and Ste followed later. What was it like in those early days?**

**I DON'T RECALL EVER WANTING TO DO ANYTHING OTHER THAN MAKE GAMES**

**SP:** John was hired to be one of the programmers forming the very first team. I went there for work experience about a year later.

**JP:** It was a lot of fun, hard work and a great learning experience. On the first day I had to pluck up the courage to ask my boss, Mike Webb, a question which would have revealed I didn't know Z80 assembly language all that well. Thankfully, Mike is





■ Shoot-em-up Zub was created for Mastertronic and it was the first game both Ste and John worked on together.



■ Magnetic Billiards is the Pickford Brothers' most recent acclaimed game. It was nominated at the gaming BAFTAs in the Mobile & Handheld category.

## DEVELOPER COMMENTS



“My biggest regret regarding the Pickford brothers is that I’ve never actually had the privilege of working directly with them. They’ve been around this industry for as long as I can remember and I’ve always admired them, not just for their creativity and great games, but also because they have never ever sold out on their principles. They are the absolute epitome of what an indie developer represents and I do believe that there is so much many fledgling studios could learn from Ste and John. The Pickfords are talented, creative, uncompromising, passionate about games (and the industry itself) but most of all, very beardy. Top, top blokes.”

GARY BRACEY, FORMER DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR OF MANCHESTER-BASED OCEAN SOFTWARE





Produced in 1992 at Software Creations, the game reworked the Pickfords' abandoned *Fleapit* coin-op title.

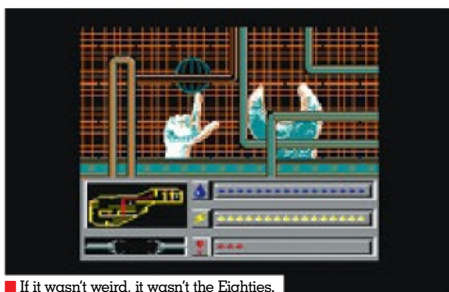
The brothers have a penchant for cute character design. Their style defined much of their output during their heyday.

a really cool bloke and an amazing coder and he didn't bat an eyelid. He just helped me out and everything went pretty well after that. I was proud of the fact that my version of the game, *DeathWake* on Spectrum, was the first to be completed. I think it took about 12 weeks. Might have been a bit longer. I don't recall ever not being a bit late.

**SP:** I loved it at Binary Design. I was messing about with pixels all day, drawing pictures on the screen or daft little animations. I found the work really interesting as there was lots of problem solving and inventing of systems and processes. If tools and platforms and pipelines ever become stable, and there's no need to invent anything in order to make a game, that's the point when I'll lose interest in making videogames.

### What sort of games did you enjoy playing?

**SP:** There weren't strict genres of games back then, so games were much more interesting in many ways. Each new game – or each good one – was practically inventing a new genre, or at least inventing elements of a genre. I just enjoyed anything that was good. Standout games for me were probably *Lords Of Midnight*, all the Ultimate Games, the Hewson Spectrum games,



If it wasn't weird, it wasn't the Eighties.



the Costa Panayi Spectrum Games, *Elite*, *Tir Na Nog*... Well, the list could be endless.

**JP:** I've never been good at twitch games so I think the ones I enjoyed most had an RPG element. *Elite* is an obvious choice but I think my favourite was *Avalon* (and *Dragonlord*) by Steve Turner. Amazing atmosphere in that game. I remember being fascinated by *Tir Na Nog*, which also had a quite magical feel, but I don't think got anywhere or solved a single puzzle.

### Did you find that gaming was a lucrative industry to get into?

**SP:** While I was still at school I worked on *Ghosts'n Goblins* as a freelance project for the programmer of the game, Nigel Alderton. I think he paid me £50, which made me feel rich. But I was paid £5,500 a year when I started work in 1986. That was brilliant for a 16-year-old school leaver. I originally planned to work in games for a year, then go to art college and head off in the direction of comics, but after a few months of being loaded, and being able to buy whatever I fancied and go to the pub whenever I wanted, there was no way I was going to go back and be a skint student, so I just carried on with the games.

### Did you do work 'on the side' too?

**SP:** There were loads of opportunities for 'foreigners' once I'd started at Binary. English

Software were just round the corner, and my manager, David Whittaker, took me round to meet the owner, Phil 'English' as we used to call him, one lunch time. Phil used to give me little graphics jobs for his games that I'd do in the evenings or weekends for an extra £100 here and there, so yeah, it felt lucrative to me as a teenager.

### The first game you both collaborated on was Zub. How did you find working together? Were there any sibling rows?

**SP:** I don't recall any rows, but it was odd that we hadn't worked on a game together before that. I think by that time we'd both, separately, had experiences where things hadn't gone quite as we'd hoped with the artist or programmer we'd been working with so with *Zub* it felt like we were both good at what we were doing and we could make something really good together.

### And then Zippo Games. Was it a big leap from designer to company owners?

**SP:** Yeah, we started to understand that just making a good game wasn't enough. We got direct experience of the snide ways that publishers would rip you off and dick you about, and what a weak position game developers were in the business environment of the time. And today, really.

### That was the way, then, wasn't it? Talented programmers and designers going their own way.

**SP:** We were probably later than most. I think a lot of the big name 8-bit game devs were freelance or worked for themselves or ran little studios. John and I were just employees at a work-for-hire studio, which was actually more unusual than working for yourself or running your own business. So I think by going our own way after Binary Design, we were doing things backwards.

### Which consoles did you enjoy playing on and developing for?

**SP:** We formed Zippo Games partly because we wanted to work on the fancy new 16-bit machines – the Atari ST and the



John Pickford did not actually program *Feud*. Created after *Zub*, John's role was to design the game for others to code.



Amiga – so that's where our interest lay initially. It was when we went to see Rare that we were introduced to the NES, and at first we weren't impressed. It seemed like an underpowered Commodore 64 in some ways and felt like a backwards step.

It was Tim and Chris Stamper who converted us into console fans – and Nintendo fans – by impressing upon us how much more polished, well designed, playable, bug-free, and just plain more fun the games were than anything on the Amiga or ST. We were sceptical, but after sitting down with *Mario* and *Zelda* and *RC Pro-AM* and *Excitebike* and a few others, we had to agree that these games were head and shoulders above what we were making.

**You worked for Rare too. Which of your games did you feel stood out?**

**SP:** I think *Solar Jetman* is probably our best from that period. I was very hopeful that *Wizards And Warriors 3* would be something special, and I did a ton of design work that I was very proud of, but I left the studio before it was complete. I think it was a bit rushed towards the end, so I'm not sure the end result was what I was aiming for.

**JP:** We got to work on Rare's prototype coin-op hardware, the Razz Board. That was a lot of fun and the game we made – *Fleapit* – was the basis of what became *Plok* on SNES.

**Why did you sell to Rare?**

**SP:** We were skint and completely reliant on them. We didn't so much sell to them, it was more that we couldn't keep the studio running on what they were paying us, so they took us over and took on our financial obligations in order for us to keep making the games they wanted.

**Did you feel you lost some control?**

**SP:** Their attitude to us changed overnight, it was really funny. When we were a separate studio we'd go down for meetings with Chris and Tim, talk about our projects then discuss games in general and the

state of the industry and we all got on great. The moment we were employees the meetings stopped, and we'd be sent 'directives' from Twycross telling us things like 'no walkmans are allowed on desks' and other bizarre rules that were related to how their internal office politics were working. It instantly became miserable.

**You worked for Software Creations. By now you were very well respected and people watched out for your games.**

**SP:** I think John and I were well known within the Manchester game dev scene but I'm

## I STILL LOVE THE PROCESS OF MAKING VIDEOGAMES, BUT IT'S BECOME TOUGH TO MAKE A LIVING

not sure our fame went anywhere beyond that little world. We were hired by Creations to work on their new SNES devkit and make their first SNES game, *Equinox*. It's a real shame what happened with that project, as it was a massive missed opportunity.

**What happened?**

**SP:** We designed a full RPG, halfway between a *Zelda* game and a proper RPG like *Dragon Warrior*. We had towns and NPCs, loads of dialogue and quests and funny running jokes. Game development was tracking about two or three months late which was hardly surprising as we were learning a new platform, so the brutal decision was made to chop out all of the RPG layer of the game, even though it had all been designed, scripted, translated and was ready to implement. Each town entrance on the world map became just a dungeon entrance, skipping the NPCs and puzzles in the town that would have eventually revealed that entrance, and we had to bodge these 'ghosts' on the world

■ Puzzle title *Wetrix* was the first game designed by the Pickfords for their Zed Two studio.



map bridges to box off areas of the world map that would have been controlled by more interesting puzzles and NPCs. It was a real hatchet job, just to stop the game being about three months late.

**This new RPG game was delayed further, wasn't it?**

**SP:** A problem with Nintendo approval, related to the isometric 3D, sprite priorities, and a bug in the SNES hardware meant the game was delayed by Nintendo for over a year in submission hell before it was released. So we could easily have got the full RPG in there without actually impacting the release date. What makes it such a shame is that if the game as designed had come out, it would have been Sony's own RPG franchise. This was before PlayStation. So, when PlayStation launched, we would be the guys making Sony's main first-party RPG games. That's typical of the luck we've had.

**Why did you leave SC to form Zed 2?**

**SP:** We wanted to form a small team to focus on making good games, which was very different to the direction Creations was going in. They were doing big *FIFA* conversions for EA and that kind of thing. We tried to form a group within Creations to do that, but they wouldn't go with it, so we left to do it anyway as our own studio. It was pretty much the exact same reason why we left Binary Design to form Zippo.

**At Zippo, you worked on 8/16-bit games.**

**How did you find creating for consoles?**

**SP:** It was still just about possible for little studios to make console games when we did *Wetrix*, before the doors were closed to the little guys for a long time. Only in the last few years, with online stores and downloadable games is it possible for tiny studios to get their games on consoles.

**You've had some amazing successes recently. Why has *Magnetic Billiards* been so acclaimed, do you think?**

**SP:** Haha, we haven't had any success at all! *Magnetic Billiards* has been critically acclaimed, and a lot of people like it, but it's not been anything like a commercial success. Just the opposite so far...

**JP:** This time next year, Rodders!



■ The Pickfords work from home in Greater Manchester.



## THE RETRO GUIDE TO... LLAMASOFT

As TxK reignites fresh interest in legendary coder Jeff Minter, we take the opportunity to replay his company's impressive back catalogue of games

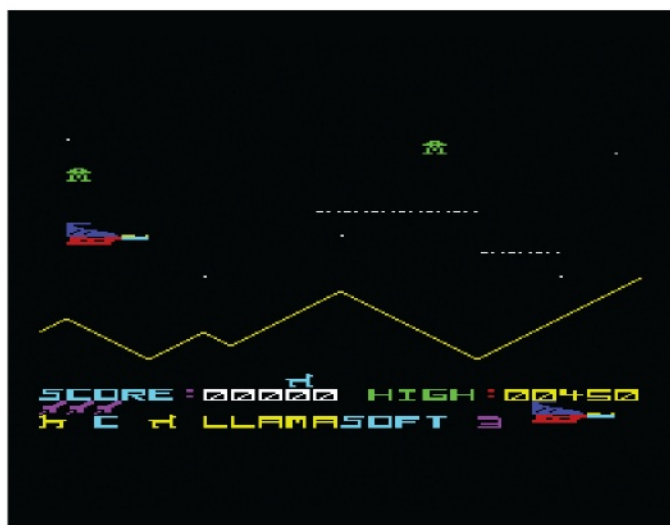




**JEFF MINTER IS** Llamasoft. After making a number of games for the Commodore Pet and ZX80, he founded Llamasoft in 1982 and has tirelessly worked away on a host of interesting games ever since. Unafraid to go against the grain, he's seen by some as a maverick, others as a hippy, and some as 'that man who loves his sheep' (Minter's Welsh retreat is home to a great many of his four-

legged friends, from sheep to llamas). Affectionately known as Yak by his base of hardcore fans, his love of twitch shooting and quirky game design has ensured that he's constantly bubbled under the radar of many gamers.

And yet, even now, some 32 years later, Llamasoft and Minter are still going strong. Why not join us then, as we revisit the highs and lows of Llamasoft's extensive back catalogue.



## ANDES ATTACK 1982

**SYSTEMS: VIC 20, ATARI ST**

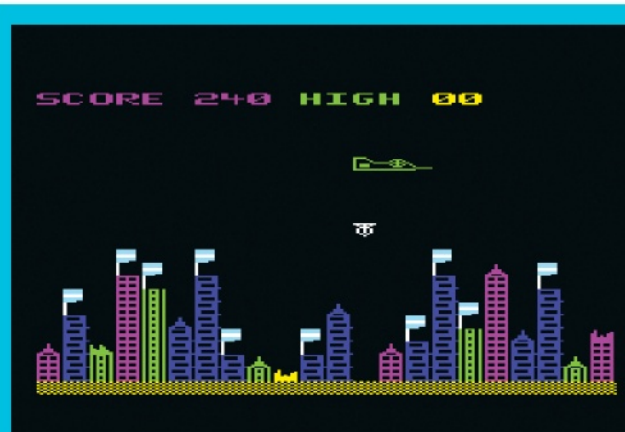
■ Cheerfully described by Minter himself as "shitty" in an interview, *Andes Attack* was Llamasoft's first commercial game. It's an unashamed clone of *Defender*, let down by the host hardware. Being a Minter game, you'll find yourself rescuing llamas instead of humans, but it's the otherwise only unique aspect of a rather bland clone. It was remade several years later for the Atari ST.



## ABDUCTOR 1982

**SYSTEMS: VIC 20**

■ This is another typical Minter blaster, which plays out like a cross between *Defender* and *Galaxians*. Played across a single screen, incoming waves of extremely fast enemies fly in and attempt to carry off the six humans you're meant to be protecting. Shooting them down allows you to continue with the game, which will eventually end when all six of your humans have been captured from you. While the concept behind it is sound, you'll often find yourself caught out by annoying aliens that magically materialise beneath you, making life loss an inevitable eventuality. Still good fun in the meantime, though.



## BLITZKRIEG 1982

**SYSTEMS: VIC 20**

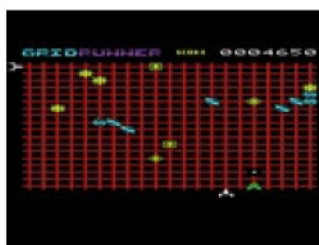
■ Originally known as *Bomb Buenos Aires!*, this controversial game capitalised on the Falklands War that was raging at the time. It made the *Daily Telegraph*, which ensured that Llamasoft received plenty of complaints. The game itself is a decent clone of *City Bomber* that sees you bombing buildings so your bomber can land to the strains of *Rule Britannia*. Minter also added Argentinean flags on the buildings, in case gamers didn't realise what they were destroying.



## DEFLEX 1982

**SYSTEMS: VARIOUS**

■ Minter avoids his usual shooters and makes a fast-paced dexterity game where you must bounce a ball around the screen using bats. You need to direct your ball to each on-screen number, but using too many bats creates time penalties. A fun, insanely fast game that's a real reflex test.



## GRIDRUNNER 1982

**SYSTEMS: VARIOUS**

■ This was Minter's first big hit and it's easy to see why. Like the best of Minter's games, it's based on an arcade classic (in this case *Centipede*) but Minter adds plenty of clever tricks to make it stand out. The game itself is set on a huge grid with lasers that patrol its edges. Unlike *Centipede*, shooting the caterpillar creates bombs that explode after a set amount of time. Add in the patrolling lasers that routinely fire off deadly salvos and you have an incredibly enjoyable blaster that proves to be the perfect score chaser. Interestingly, the less powerful Vic 20 has one of the best versions of the game, easily eclipsing the gameplay that was found in Commodore's more powerful C64.



## MATRIX 1982

SYSTEMS: VARIOUS

■ The insane sequel to *Gridrunner* that improves on the core formulae no end. The grid moves, the caterpillar pieces can now move diagonally around the playing area, while deflectors will reflect bullets. And then there's the snitch, a beastly little creation that patrols the top of the grid and tells the lasers where you're hiding if you stay in one position for that little bit too long. Definitely one of Minter's best.

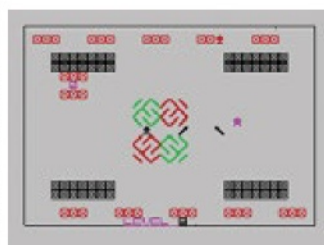
**"TRUST MINTER TO TAKE SOMETHING AS MUNDANE AS MOWING THE LAWN AND TURN IT INTO AN EXCELLENT FAST-PACED ARCADE GAME"**



## ROX III 1982

SYSTEMS: VIC 20, ZX SPECTRUM

■ This is an update of a pre-Llamasoft game and is an interesting variant on *Missile Command* where you can shoot down incoming asteroids. While you can only fire a single shot, you can retake it if it hasn't yet left the confines of your shield. As the game continues your shield gets higher and higher, which does alter the gameplay. It's certainly playable, but it does lack in the expected Minter magic.



## SUPER DEFLEX 1982

SYSTEMS: ZX SPECTRUM

■ This *Deflex* sequel isn't quite as enjoyable as the original, but it does include some giant llamas. It's a lot slower paced than the Vic 20 version, meaning it's nowhere near as frantic to play, but the later stages do become trickier, with plenty of hazards that present quite a challenge. Oh, and it has some really great reproductions of the *Superman* and *Battlestar Galactica* themes on the game over screen too.

## ATTACK OF THE MUTANT CAMELS 1983

SYSTEMS: ATARI 8-BIT, C64

■ One of Minter's most regarded games, this is a fantastic *Defender* variant that borrows heavily from Atari 2600's *The Empire Strikes Back*. Instead, you deal with giant mutant camels, avoiding the many spitballs they throw at you. It's fast and furious and extremely funny, highlighting Minter's odd sense of humour and his love of ungulates.



## HEADBANGERS HEAVEN 1983

SYSTEMS: ZX SPECTRUM

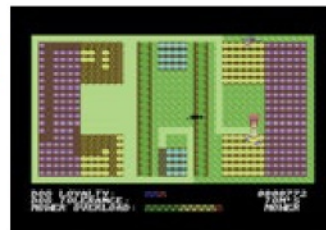
■ Play as Chico the headbanger, running lefts and right collecting money, while hammers fall ever downwards. Lose a life if your body gets hit, but earn a multiplier if you nut a falling hammer. A life is lost on an eleventh hit, so red aspirin-infused hammers must be used to bring your headache down. It's a neat concept that becomes very addictive.



## HOVER BOVER 1983

SYSTEMS: ATARI 8-BIT, C64

■ Trust Minter to take something as mundane as mowing the lawn and turn it into an excellent fast-paced arcade game. After stealing your neighbour's mower, you must mow your lawn as quickly as possible. You'll need to avoid your angry neighbour and his pet dog, who don't take kindly to your theft. The levels are well designed (you'll want to avoid damaging flowerbeds too) and there's a fun rendition of *English Country Garden*. It's all held together by Minter's unique oddball humour, distinctive visuals and some well-crafted controls.



## TRIP THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

In addition to his love for ungulates, shooters and all things psychedelic, Jeff Minter is also known for his groundbreaking light synthesisers



Jeff's earliest effort was *Psychodelia*, released on a number of 8-bit consoles. He recalls smoking many spliffs and listening to Pink Floyd and refers to its creation as a 'life-changing moment'. Colourspace arrived a year later and he created the complex *Trip-A-Tron*

in 1987, proudly shown off at the many trading events Llamasoft attended. Minter's skills became apparent and he then worked on projects including VLM-1 for the Atari Jaguar CD-ROM and VLM-2 for Toshiba's Nuon. VLM-3, intended for Unity, never saw the light of day but led to Neon, which in turn was used in Microsoft's Xbox 360. It's ironic that Minter's biggest success is taken for granted by owners who are no doubt oblivious to its creator's past works.





### META-LLAMAS 1983

SYSTEMS: VIC 20, ZX SPECTRUM

■ A deliciously nutty game that is a highly innovative little shooter in its own right. You control a llama with a rebounding laser and deflect shots with a force field that can be raised and lowered as you see fit. Spiders drop down from the top of the screen and you must take them out as quickly as possible. Fast and frantic, it's a fantastic little game that we would love to see revisited.

### REVENGE OF THE MUTANT CAMELS 1983

SYSTEMS: VARIOUS

■ Perhaps the greatest game that allows you to control a deadly killer camel. Minter turned the tables for his sequel, allowing you to stomp through some utterly surreal landscapes and deal out deadly laser death. You can team up with a second player or an AI-controlled helper and it features some of his most imaginative and insane visuals yet. This is the later enhanced Amiga version, but many swear by the C64 outing.



### TRAXX 1983

SYSTEMS: VIC 20, ZX SPECTRUM

■ *Amidar* is a great game but this clone from Minter is far below his usual quality. Its biggest issue is its unresponsive controls, which make filling in the huge grid incredibly tricky. It also loses points for having one of the most annoying tunes we've ever heard in a videogame. A dull misfire that only the biggest Minter fan could love.



### HELLGATE 1984

SYSTEMS: VIC 20, C16, C64

■ *Hellgate's* name is certainly apt. Four fighters surround the playing arena. Up and down control the left and right fighters, while left and right control the top and bottom ones. Working in tandem you must destroy the insanely quick waves that appear before they can crash into your ships. It's a novel idea, but is far too hard for its own good. For masochists only.



### SHEEP IN SPACE 1984

SYSTEMS: C64

■ Considering his fondness for sheep it was inevitable that Minter would eventually make a game about them. This is another *Defender* clone, but one with plenty of lovely touches. Gravitational fields affect your firing based on where you are, while your sheep can graze on grass to reduce its hunger (overfeeding or starving it causes a loss of a life). You'll never look at sheep in quite the same way again after playing this.



### BATALYX 1984

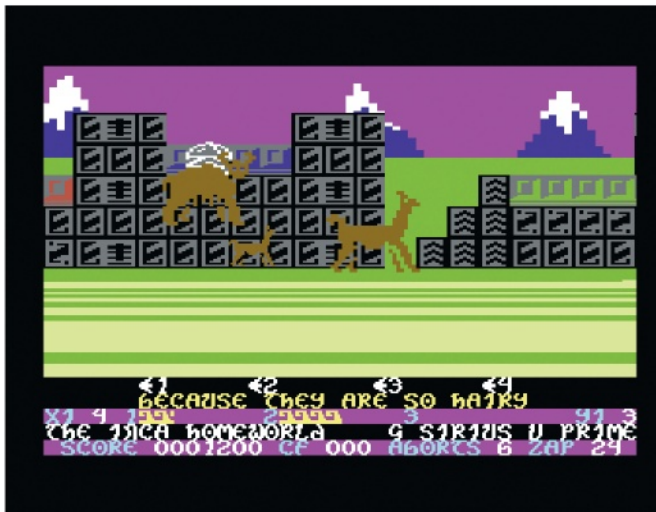
SYSTEMS: C64

■ A very underrated compilation of mini-games that may have been a little too confusing for some. It's not the clearest game to understand, but the amount of imagination and effort packed into each game (that you can switch between on the fly) can't be disputed. One minute you're in a first-person shooter controlling a killer camel, the next you're running along ceiling as a weird goatman. Minter at his baffling best.

## MAMA LLAMA 1985

SYSTEMS: C64

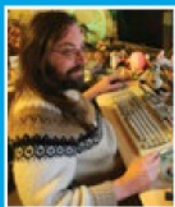
■ Ambitious is the kindest way to sum up this rather disappointing effort. Naff would be another. While the graphics and sound are top notch, the gameplay is completely and utterly confusing. You're required to protect a llama and her two babies from incoming enemies, but it's not really clear how you do it. It ends up being a rather messy – but undeniably impressive looking – game.



## IRIDIS ALPHA 1986

SYSTEMS: C64

■ Now this is more like it. *Iridis Alpha* is another graphical tour de force, with heavy *Defender* influences. It's possible to switch between two distinct characters (one walking, one flying) and there are also twin planet surfaces and useful warp gates to discover. Everything runs at an insanely smooth pace, while the hectic gameplay is just what we would expect from the bearded one. Highly recommended.



## BEHIND THE SCENES INTERVIEW: THE MAKING OF TXK

Minter himself shares some secrets about the long-awaited game

### Why choose the Vita for TxK?

You can blame Shahid Ahmad at Sony for that (and Gaz Liddon for putting me in touch with him). Shahid's on a mission to bring a lot of indie content to PlayStation and wondered if I'd be interested in developing a Vita title. I've always liked the Vita and thought it'd be fun to work on it, especially after so long on iOS. I thought a game in the style of *T2K* would look spectacular on the Vita's great screen, and it'd be something I could do in a few months, so I suggested we do *TxK*. I wasn't wrong, it looks and plays great on the Vita.

### This is your most refined Tempest update yet. What appeals to you about the original game?

I liked the abstract aesthetic. The *Tempest* coin-op was one of the best-looking colour vector games

ever made. Gameplay wise it's not quite as good as Eugene Jarvis' best but it's still a great, fast and challenging shooter. Although the gameplay is simple, everything is very well balanced (if brutal) and the spinny controller gives it a unique feeling in play.

### How did you choose its superb soundtrack?

The soundtrack was all created by people on the Yakyak forum. I posted in there about the project and asked for contributions "in the style of *T2K*" and the tracks you hear are what the musicians came up with. Great tunes and it's really interesting to hear how each person interpreted the *T2K* style. The guys did an amazing job and the game sounds great.

### How does Sony's approach to digital games differ compared to Microsoft's?

The guys at Sony have been super helpful throughout. Inevitably there's a bit of form filling and back and forth with QA towards the end of a project but they've done their best to make things as smooth as possible. We only had the one experience with MS and XBLA was quite a different animal back then to what it became in later years so I don't know how Sony compare to more current MS stuff. Sony has also been awesome helping to promote the game after release, couldn't have been looked after better really.

### You've toned down a lot of your trademark Minterisms. Was this intentional?

I wanted to make something that was maximally accessible and given how perfect things look on the Vita screen there really

wasn't any need to go overboard with the psychedelia. The style that emerged was just right I think. There's still plenty of Minter in there, but it's more directly applied to the gameplay than overwhelming graphical effects.

### You've been creating games for over 30 years now. What's the secret to your success?

I don't know if you'd call it "success" as I never seem to do mad numbers or anything and my brother the rat catcher makes loads more money than I do and just goes on holiday all the time these days. But I am happy to still be able to do what I enjoy doing after so long, and the single most important guiding principle to me has always been to just make things that I really, really want to play or use myself.



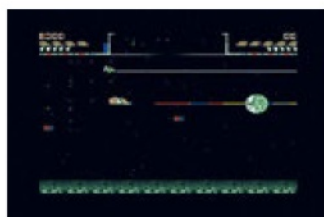




## SUPER GRIDRUNNER

**SYSTEMS: ATARI ST, AMIGA**

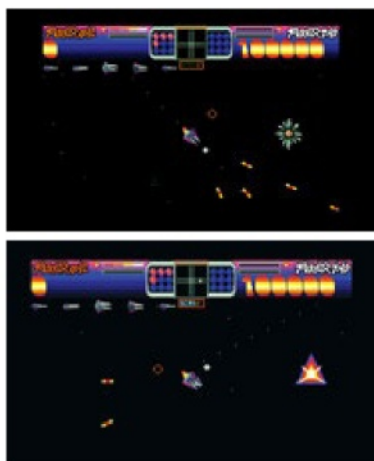
Minter continued to refine one of his most popular games, updating it for 16-bit computers. Minter prefers *GR++* but this is an equally fine blaster and is incredibly well refined. It controls brilliantly with a mouse, while you can attach and detach the head of your ship (which is indestructible) to battle the game's strategic waves of enemies. It's a neat idea letting you use the device as a shield, which becomes an essential skill on later stages.



## DEFENDER 2 1990

**SYSTEMS: ATARI ST, AMIGA**

Originally created for Atari UK, this is obviously an update to Eugene Jarvis's *Defender* and includes both the original 1980 arcade classic and its sequel, *Stargate*. While the mouse controls feel too twitchy at first, they work surprisingly well with practice, allowing you to quickly adapt to the insanely fast pace *Defender 2* runs at. There's also some great music found on the title screen and some suitably crazy power-ups.



## PHOTON STORM 1990

**SYSTEMS: ATARI ST, AMIGA**

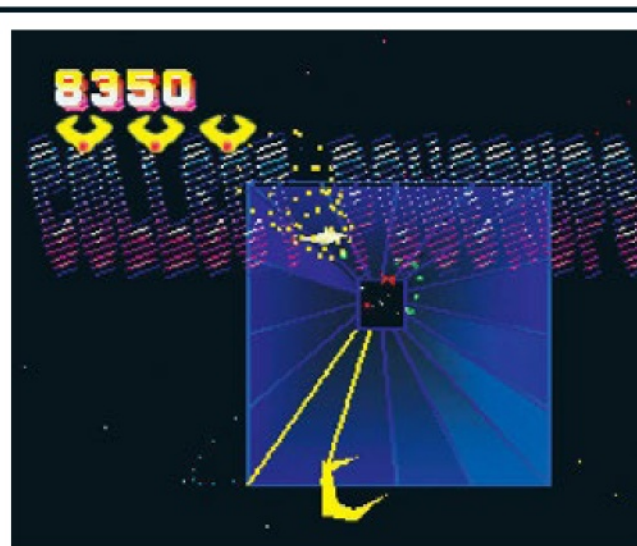
Another Minter reimagining of a classic coin-op, this time *Sinistar*. It once again features some surprisingly responsive mouse controls, but is let down by its rather bland gameplay that sees you simply collecting pods and returning them to a stargate. It's definitely not a terrible game, but comes across as a little bland by Minter's usual exacting standards.



## LLAMATRON 1991

**SYSTEMS: ATARI ST, AMIGA, PC**

Insanely addictive clone of *Robotron* that puts you in the hooves of a laser-spitting llama. To get around the dual-sticks of the original arcade games, Minter created a lock-on system requiring you to hold down the fire button to shoot in a specific direction. While not as elegant as the original game, it works extremely well. The gameplay is amazingly manic with Minter throwing sheep, sprite rips from classic shooters, coke cans, marijuana plants and all sorts of crazy sound samples into the mix, delivering a nutty shoot-'em-up that's still a blast to play.



## TEMPEST 2000 1994

**SYSTEMS: VARIOUS**

Minter is a huge fan of Dave Theurer's *Tempest*, so he leapt at the chance to remake it for Atari's ill-fated Jaguar. It's an astonishing update featuring fantastically trippy visuals, a mind-blowing soundtrack, insanely tight gameplay and the ability to jump off the playing area. It's widely considered to be the console's best game and remains an incredibly satisfying shooter. Variations of it would later appear on the PlayStation, PC and Saturn.



## DEFENDER 2000 1995

SYSTEMS: JAGUAR

Unfortunately, Minter's next update of an Atari classic wasn't anywhere near as good. It's described by many as an underrated gem, but we're betting that's just Jaguar owners. Clunky controls, ugly visuals and a ship that's far too big (resulting in many cheap deaths) lets it down badly. *Defender Plus*, which is halfway between 2000 and the original (which is also included), isn't too bad though.

## SPACE GIRAFFE 2007

SYSTEMS: XBOX 360, PC

After the death of Unity on Nintendo's GameCube, Minter worked at camp Microsoft creating its music visualiser and this polarising classic. Aesthetically it's very similar to *Tempest 2000*, but plays very differently, featuring many more enemies, the ability to shunt enemies off the play area (known as bulling) and the option to collect bullets for points once a level has bwwn completed. It's a little too inaccessible for some and the Minter mannerisms can feel a little over the top at times – it's often hard to see what's going on – but it's still a highly satisfying blaster all the same. It was also recently released on Steam.



## MINOTAUR RESCUE 2011

SYSTEMS: iOS

This marked the first of Minter's Minotaur Project games, releases designed to play like old-school classics on Apple's iOS range. It's a fun blend of *Asteroids* and *Spacewar* that features all of Minter's trademark particle effects and psychedelic visuals. It's exceptionally well suited to touch screen controls and supports up to four players on iPad.



"THE MINTER MANNERISMS CAN FEEL A LITTLE OVER THE TOP AT TIMES BUT IT'S STILL A HIGHLY SATISFYING BLASTER ALL THE SAME"



## GOATUP 2011

SYSTEMS: iOS

Jeff's second addition to the Minotaur Project was Llamasoft's first proper platformer, which has elements of *Doodle Jump* in it. Each platform is covered in grass and you must get your goat to munch it all up. You can earn kids by kissing goats, which in turn can be used to whip and kill enemies as they follow behind you. Another crazy game that's absolutely oozing with Minter charm and is a poignant love letter to all the classic 8-bit platformers.





## MINTER MISSES

Backing the wrong sheep

■ Although he's had an extremely prolific career, Minter has also had an unlucky one, constantly releasing amazing games on underappreciated consoles. *Tempest 2000* is widely regarded as one of the finest games on the Jaguar, but hardly any gamer bought the console, while the fabled Project Unity failed to materialise on GameCube. *Tempest 3000* is an exceedingly good sequel to *Tempest 2000*, but lacked an audience because it was released on the Nuon. You don't remember the Nuon? Don't

worry, neither does anybody else. He also worked on games for the Lynx and Panther that never saw the light of day. It's the Konix Multisystem that many people associate Minter with, though. Designed by the makers of many popular joysticks, it promised to be revolutionary and Minter was heavily involved with its creation as well as its games. Unfortunately, Konix's plans were too ambitious and even selling off its joystick range to Spectravision couldn't save the console. It remains one of gaming's biggest 'what ifs'.



## SUPER OX WARS 2012

SYSTEMS: iOS

■ *Super Ox Wars* is Minter's first vertical shooter, channelling the spirits of *Star Force* and *Mega Force* and adding in some neat polarity mechanics. Collecting items of the same polarity (either red or blue) increases your strength and the chances of extra lives. It's a neat idea and, like all of Minter's iOS games, is equally playable using the touch controls or via iCade support.



## TXK 2014

SYSTEMS: PS VITA

■ Jeff Minter's finest game to date in our eyes. It's an incredibly refined version of *Tempest* with a beautiful difficulty curve, challenging level design and an incredible array of eclectic tunes. It's quite simply the best tube shooter that we've ever played, including Dave Theurer's original that inspired it. Hopefully it will provide the mainstream break that has so far eluded Minter and Llamasoft in recent years.

# AND THE REST

Every other game that Llamasoft has released

### Rat Man 1982

SYSTEMS: VIC 20



### Laserzone 1983

SYSTEMS: VARIOUS

### Rox 64 1983

SYSTEMS: C64

### Yak's Progress 1984

SYSTEMS: 1985

### Ancipital 1984

SYSTEMS: C64, ZX SPECTRUM

### Voidrunner 1987

SYSTEMS: C16, C64

### Revenge Of The Mutant Camels 2 1987

Systems: Atari ST



### Hardcore 1992

SYSTEMS: ATARI ST

### Llamazap 1995

Systems: Atari Falcon

### Tempest 3000 2000

SYSTEMS: NUON

### Deflex 2002

Systems: Pocket PC

### Hover Bovver 2: Grand Theft Flymo 2002

SYSTEMS: POCKET PC



### Gridrunner ++ 2002

Systems: Mac, PC

### Space Invaders Extreme

2009

SYSTEMS: XBOX 360

### Gridrunner Revolution 2009

SYSTEMS: PC



### Minotron 2112 2011

SYSTEMS: iOS

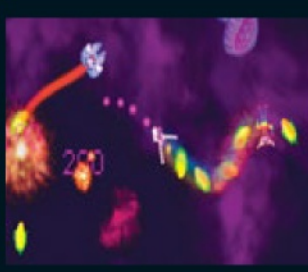


### Caverns Of Minos 2012

SYSTEMS: iOS

### Gridrunner iOS 2012

SYSTEMS: iOS



### Five A Day 2012

SYSTEMS: iOS

### Deflex 2013

SYSTEMS: iOS

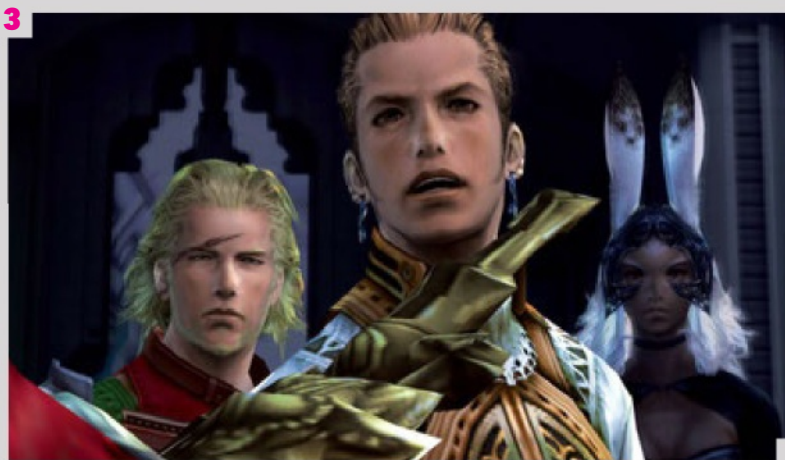
### GoatUp 2 2013

SYSTEMS: iOS

# ESSENTIALS

## 10 BRITISH [STEREOTYPES]

■ Brits have a bad reputation in the wider media, the English particularly. If not portrayed as the aristocratic villain in a Hollywood action flick, it's all about the brutal violence. We'd like to say that games alter this paradigm and show Brits in a little more genuine depth than Hollywood, but as this list shows, games portray British people just as badly...



**Dudley**  
From: Street Fighter III

**1** Dudley is an English boxer, and the heir to a vast inheritance acquired by a family of successful athletes. Dudley was constantly told that he was far too small to be a professional fighter, and when his family's vast wealth got eaten up in taxes (or something like that) Dudley took up boxing to earn back some of the wealth. With his mismatching boxing gloves and dinner trousers, cummerbund and suspenders – and the fact that he is even called *Dudley* – the prizefighter is an unfortunate example of how Britons have been stored in the collective cultural Japanese psyche. He even goes into his fights with a rose in his mouth. Come on.

**Drippy**  
From: Ni No Kuni: Wrath of The White Witch

**2** Drippy – a Great Fairy – is a peculiar creature that has a lamp attached to its nose, because, well, why not? After being restored to life by protagonist Oliver's tears (yes, really), the Great Fairy begins to teach the player how to use magic. That's all well and good, but Drippy – for unknown reasons – is Welsh. In a world where there are very few allusions to the real Earth, why is there a Welsh fairy? Is it because Welsh folklore is rich with mischievous faeries that get banished from their own realms? Or is it because strong accents are an easy way to characterise an otherwise odd-looking feller? Who knows.

**Balthier**  
From: Final Fantasy XII

**3** A sky pirate that jumps into action in a gilded waistcoat and black leather trousers, Balthier is every part the typical English rogue. He's even got that self-assured, mild arrogance down – "I'm the leading man", he'll often say to Vaan – the actual leading man – as the characters make their way around Ivalice. Balthier hits upon the English stereotype in that 'charming' way: that is to say, Balthier calls himself charming, but everyone else would just call him egotistical, haughty, proud and conceited. Balthier is basically the *Final Fantasy* answer to James Bond – gun-toting, cloying, full of one-liners and simply *dashing*, darling.

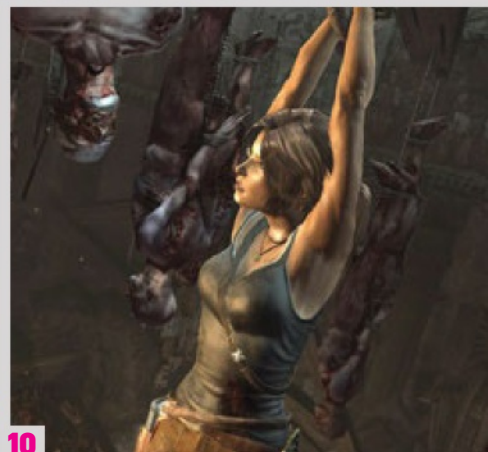
**Sir Daniel Fortesque**  
From: MediEvil

**4** The leading man of the *MediEvil* series – a franchise known for its focus on a very British flavour of horror-comedy – Sir Daniel Fortesque is a sap of a soldier that was kept out of the Hall of Heroes because of his inability to kill an evil sorcerer. Accidentally revived by the same sorcerer 100 years later, Sir Dan occupies a very recent embodiment of the British stereotype: the Tim Burton Briton. Usually portrayed by Jonny Depp, this incarnation of the stereotype is gangly, a little visually off-putting and quirky. He's also got the extra zing of being a little sociopathic and misunderstood – but has a good soul, obviously.

**Shaun Hastings**  
From: Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood

**5** Voiced by Danny Wallace – who probably has one of the most stereotypical English accents conceivable – Shaun Hastings was every part your standard computer slave that can be found in any budget sci-fi show. Neurotic, sarcastic, superior but ultimately 'the good guy', you – Desmond Miles – relied on Shaun to guide you through some of the trickier bits of the Animus' infrastructure. We always thought of Shaun as that school teacher you loved to hate; dressed like a Physics lecturer on casual Friday, Shaun embodied that specific kind of English pomp and bluster you just don't seem to get anywhere else, and for good reason.





#### Captain Price

From: Call of Duty: Modern Warfare

**6** On the other end of the spectrum to the typically passive, charming-but-non-lethal Brits we've seen in this list, we have Captain Price. Captain Price is absolutely the most brutal, direct and frankly terrifying character to grace this Essentials page – a cold, hard pragmatist, Price will sacrifice anything and anyone to make the mission at hand a success. Price sums up the SAS mentality that you'll see in movies everywhere – he's compassionate and emphatic, but by God if there's a job to be done, he'll ruddy well do it. Also, sporting that impressive handlebar moustache is very chap-like, right?

#### Kent Paul

From: Grand Theft Auto: Vice City

**7** Another left-field entry on our list of racial stereotypes, Kent Paul makes up that bit in the middle of the Venn diagram between 'geezer' and 'wide boy'. Voiced by the diamond geezer himself, Danny Dyer, Kent Paul handily outlines where he comes from in a very revealing bit of speech – "the name's Paul", he tells Tommy Vercetti, "from Kent, near London." How very illuminating. Paul is a knowing and self-effacing take on London in the Eighties, a criticism of the yuppie culture running rampant through the streets of the West, observed through the eyes of a kid who, really, is nothing more than a gobby street rat.

#### Reaver

From: Fable II

**8** Reaver has no concept whatsoever about the concept of morality. He is beyond immoral – he doesn't even know what they are to begin with. He is a hedonist with little to no respect for others, it's hinted that he's an alcoholic and he is so arrogant it hurts. But he also falls into that amazing character trope widely known as 'the magnificent bastard' – which we like to imagine is like a Byronic anti-hero. During a fight at Smuggler's Beach, Reaver scores seven consecutive headshots and then tells your character "You can tell them [your grandchildren] about that, too. Not that they'll believe you..." All in Stephen Fry's voice.

#### Steve Fox

From: Tekken 4

**9** If Kent Paul drops in this list in the middle of geezer and wideboy, then Steve Fox is the undiluted form of the former. He's a real London 'G' – mixing in with some bad circles and getting the attention of some hardcore London gangsters. He's also a pretty cocky nationalist, too – almost everything Steve wears has a Union Jack emblazoned on it somewhere. Oddly enough, between Tekken 4 and 5, Steve managed to change his accent from a Northern London inspired tone to something that almost resembled Irish. We don't know why this happened, but we found it a little offensive. We don't all sound the same, do we?

#### Lara Croft

From: Tomb Raider

**10** Lara Croft's reimagining at the hands of Rihanna Pratchett turned the pragmatic, spelunking virtuoso into a mewling schoolgirl. If you go to any arts Uni in the UK, you'll find students just like Lara and her friend, speaking in that peculiar 'uni' accent that seems to have spread across the country in the last decade (it's a sort of South London meets Oxford?). At least Lara's retains some of her inner strength and character though, because if we had to play through the game as the squawking student you meet on the ship at the very beginning of the game, we'd probably end up crying the entire way through it.

# THE V A U L T



## METAL GEAR SOLID WIRED WATCHES

MANUFACTURER: **Seiko** PRICE: **£300.15**

IF YOU'RE ONE of the players that feels that *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes* represents great value for money and understands that it's a game about replayability value and beating your best score, then you might want to push your Snake fantasy even further and invest in the incredibly well-crafted and immaculately presented Wired watch. Kojima Productions teamed up with manufacturer Seiko to produce the watch, which has been designed by long-term *Metal Gear Solid* artist Yoji Shinkawa, to be sold alongside special editions of the game (but is also available independently). There have only been 1300 of the watches produced, each of them individually numbered. With *Metal Gear Solid V* decals etched into the back panel of the watch, as well as a skull decal visible in the middle inner-timer, the whole item looks stylish enough to be a real

premium-quality watch, yet has all the subtle *Metal Gear* hints that make it identifiable to any fan of the series (the big 'ZERO' at the 60 minute mark is our favourite nod to *Ground Zeroes*).

The watch has a 24-hour timer inset on the face, and the three dials on the outer rim allow individual control of each clock-face. The watch is beautifully made, as you'd expect for the price, and comes in a single colour – black with gold trim. Also pictured is the *Rising* '1st anniversary' piece – another Wired branded watch released to commemorate the birthday of Kojima's last game, *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*. The *Rising* watch is distinctly more angular and digital-styled than the more traditional *Ground Zeroes* piece, but between the both of them, there should be something to suit every *Metal Gear* fan's style.



## METAL GEAR SOLID SHOT GLASSES

RETAILER: **GAMER HEAVEN** PRICE: **£14.99**

IN CASE YOU ever need to steady your nerves before a big mission, these *Metal Gear Solid* shot glasses should help you out – featuring three iconic symbols from the franchise, each glass is 9cm high and decorated with a full-colour decal that's dishwasher friendly. They're fairly hardy, too: even if you slammed one of these bad boys down with Snake's bionic arm, they'd probably not shatter. The design of the glasses is in keeping with the best of all *Metal Gear* merchandise; you can even imagine Kojima himself Instagramming a picture of these with his next meal.





# GAMING CLOTHING



## LADIES ZELDA ZIP-UP HOODIE

With a peaked hood and a well-finished emblem on the back, this hoodie is both stylish and well-suited to *Zelda* maniacs  
<http://tinyurl.com/o2udn3t>



## TITANFALL ATLAS SPEC OFFICIAL SHIRT

If you want to show off your favourite Titan spec to all those you meet in the street, this is surely the way to do it.  
<http://tinyurl.com/qzghv3d>



## WATCH DOGS AIDEN'S BASEBALL CAP

If you're going to be heading out of an evening to hack into your local police stations or whatever, you'd better do it undercover.  
<http://tinyurl.com/pwalyel>

# ASSASSIN'S CREED ABSTERGO 4-IN-1 PEN

RETAILER: GAMERABILIA PRICE: £17.99

**WE ALWAYS THOUGHT** it'd be pretty cool to set an *Assassin's Creed* game in the modern day – imagine running around the streets of London as a sleuth assassin, taking down Templar bankers (we assume that's how modern Templars would manifest themselves). You'd be like a James Bond type; equipped with an array of fancy gadgetry like this pen – you can mark your next targets with the pen's laser pointer, call in support on your phone with the touchscreen stylus, explore the subterranean ruins you'd inevitably be lead to with the LED flashlight and, of course, write out orders for executions with the ball-point tip. And it all comes packed in a stylish tin.



# GAME BOY CARTRIDGE SOAP

MANUFACTURER: FIREBOX PRICE: £8.99



## GAMERS – BY

**DEFINITION** – tend to be more interested with completing their most recently acquired game than anything else immediately going on in their life. But the image of the modern gamer is changing – no longer are we considered smelly, antisocial introverts. Gamers are in vogue – geek chic is all over the place, and what better way to live up to our new, sharp image than with this Game Boy game-styled soap. If we could tell our younger selves that one day we'd be washing with a *Pokémon Red* cartridge, they'd think us insane... and, well, that does actually sound a bit insane...

# TITANFALL K'NEX

MANUFACTURER: K'NEX PRICE: \$12.99-\$44.99

**IF YOUR ADVENTURES** in *Titanfall* just aren't satisfying you enough, you now have the opportunity to build your own Titan, complete with pilot, and rain plastic havoc upon your pets or housemates with the projectile capabilities of the mortar canons that come included with some of the kits. The Angel City Escape set contains over 500 pieces of K'Nex, two pilots and two Spectres so you can recreate the battle scenes you'll play in game with more authenticity than you'd think. The IMC Atlas Titan set and the MILITIA Ogre Titan set both let you construct your own mechs, whereas the Pilot Strike and Pilot Attack sets allow you to build individual buildings that neatly house the pilots themselves – all together, the sets combine to make a fairly extensive plastic *Titanfall* fantasy. Whether you decide to play with them or display them in some pristine cabinet is up to you, but we're certainly not averse to the idea of 'pew pew'ing around the house like the adults that we are.



# LAST WORDS

Final thoughts from the last person left in the building



## HOLGER HAGER

CEO Cyberith

There's more to VR than getting your head in the game

It may look like something you'd use to treat a nasty spinal injury, but the Cyberith Virtualizer is aiming to be the first must-have VR accessory – assuming that the technology takes off...

### With Sony announcing Project Morpheus, do you view VR success as now inevitable?

I am fully convinced that VR is making the breakthrough right now. The progress the technology has made these months is mind-blowing, and the number of people showing interest grows daily. It is undoubtedly an indicator that a company like Sony, having revealed its own head-mounted display, is willing to invest in research and development of virtual reality devices. Soon, VR will find its way into the midst of society and VR devices will be found in the majority of living rooms all over the world

### Isn't there a danger only a few hardcore fans will be interested?

Our VR setup consisting of the Virtualizer, the Oculus Rift and the Wii Mote has been tested by over 1500 people already. Many of them weren't gamers or familiar with VR, but nearly everyone was thrilled by the experience. The most important factor is the

immersion, because the user feels like they would have actually entered the virtual world.

### Can you see the Virtualizer working on consoles?

I consider the use of the Virtualizer in conjunction with consoles quite possible, but currently consoles need more VR content, which should be available soon though. Making the Virtualizer compatible with consoles isn't difficult from a technological standpoint.

### What's different about VR in 2014 compared to 20 years ago?

The biggest difference of course is the technological progress made since the 1990s. In VR everything has to feel realistic, otherwise the immersion will be broken and the user does not believe they are part of the virtual world. The technology needed for creating said immersion wasn't available 20 years ago. This included the processing and graphics power of the computers as well as other mandatory areas like modern sensor and display technology. For the first time in the history of mankind we are able to create an immersive VR experience with both low expense but high quality and are able to make it accessible for almost everyone.

Soon, VR will find its way into the midst of society and VR devices will be found in the majority of living rooms



Virtual reality may be coming back in a big way, but we're not so convinced about the chin glove.

# games™

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